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Galaxy

MAGAZINE
SCIENCE FICTION

A Novella of
Man In Eternity

THE REGION BETWEEN

Harlan Ellison

THE PROPHETEER

Leo P. Kelley

VAUGHN BODÉ
ROBERT SILVERBERG
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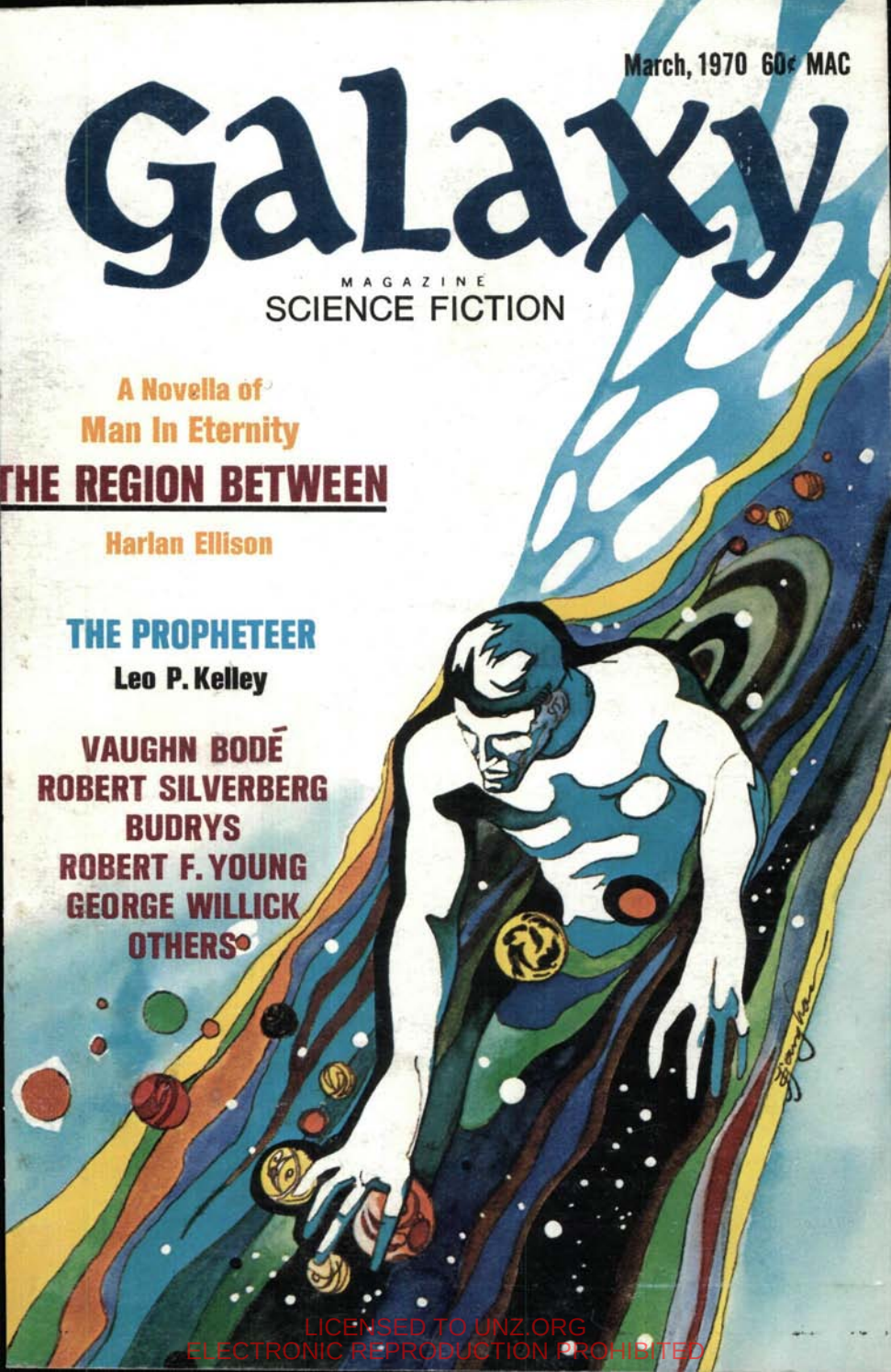
OTHERS



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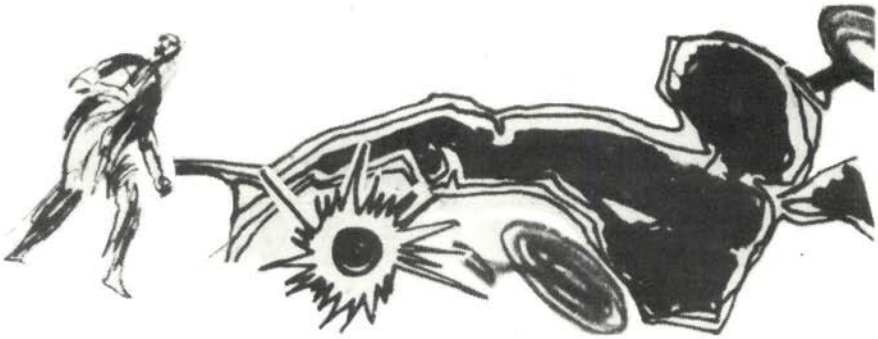

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Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

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MARCH, 1970

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MAN IN ETERNITY

I want to ask you to a guideless tour of your galaxy and mine. The thing to remember is—it's there. Not to be created, shaped or molded.

It exists.

To be explored.

Governed by itself.

A great cold cloud of sparsely diffused matter unheated by thirty thousand million suns where you and I—and some billions like us—scantly teeter on the edge of self-extinction while entertaining ourselves with the notion that we can control our destiny by fragmenting our gods, concepts and faiths. Or the other way around, depending on the prophet of your choice.

Harlan Ellison's *The Region Between*, leading off this issue, is the first of three novellas by leading science-fiction authors on a Man-in-eternity theme scheduled to be published in the *GALAXY GROUP* of science-fiction magazines. Keith Laumer's *Of Death What Dreams* is slated for the forthcoming issue *WORLDS OF TOMORROW* and Gordon Dickson's *Maverick* for *WORLDS OF FANTASY*.

Each is or will be treated as the author wrote it and each has its own great validity as you will see.

The Region Between is, of course, by its nature and as the title suggests, uncharted save by Harlan Ellison. Typography and meanings became interlocked and forced their own distortions of time-space on our pages—the story simply could not be told in our standard physical format. So we adapted to contain it.

The result is a challenging and at times mind-wrenching deep-probe into the unknown—but perhaps not unknowable in its pertinence to you and me and those billions like us who inhabit Earth today.

You don't have to like Harlan Ellison's in-between region—you may disagree with it—but take the tour and somewhere you will find yourself with a position on it—and in your galaxy and mine.

One thing—it's not a place to visit. You and I are trapped in it today and our progeny tomorrow if we survive self-extinction—if we can avoid proving ourselves, as some scientists now suggest, an evolutionary error.

If not—what Ellison calls our baileyness may have its innings.

But in all common sense and if your galaxy and mine is to be saved—for the last of us to survive my vote goes to Jack Gaughan, cartographer of Ellison's *Region*, mapper of the unknown. I've worked with some of the greatest of the space-benders and take nothing away from the giants when I say that—this man *knows* the way.

The next issue of *Galaxy* will bring you some insights on Darwin by Ray Bradbury; the history-making biospace exploits of *Allison, Carmichael and Tattersall*; Dannie Plachta's matter-over-mind *Power Play*—and Gaughan.

JAKOBSSON

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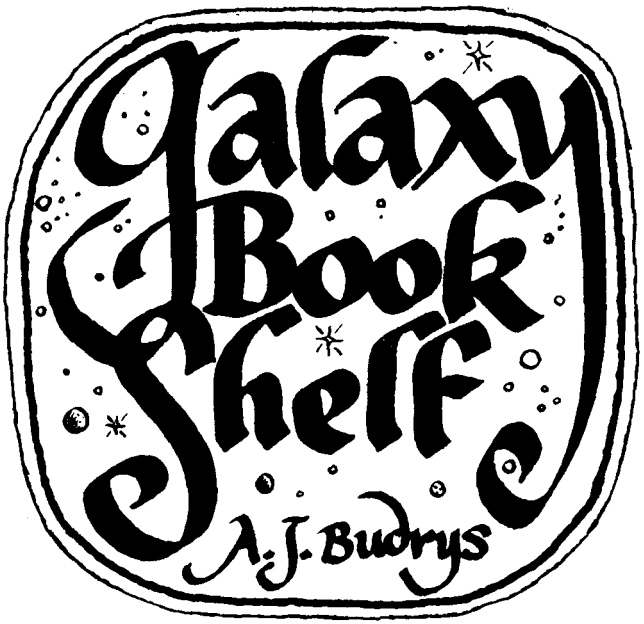

The Index to Science Fiction Magazines: 1951-1965
Norman Metcalf

Adventures in Discovery
Edited by Tom Purdom

The Double: Bill Symposium
William C. Mallardi
William L. Bowers

As many of you will know, science fiction is unique in commercial literature because of the nature of some of its readers. These readers, who are organized into various kinds of clubs, including a large body of individuals who declare affiliation with nothing smaller than sf itself, are collectively called "fans." Unlike Mets fans, James Bond fans, Baker Street Irregulars, Burroughs Bibliophiles or Conan's own Hyborean Legion, these people are not primarily aficionados of a particular character —although some of them, as

(Please turn to page 140)

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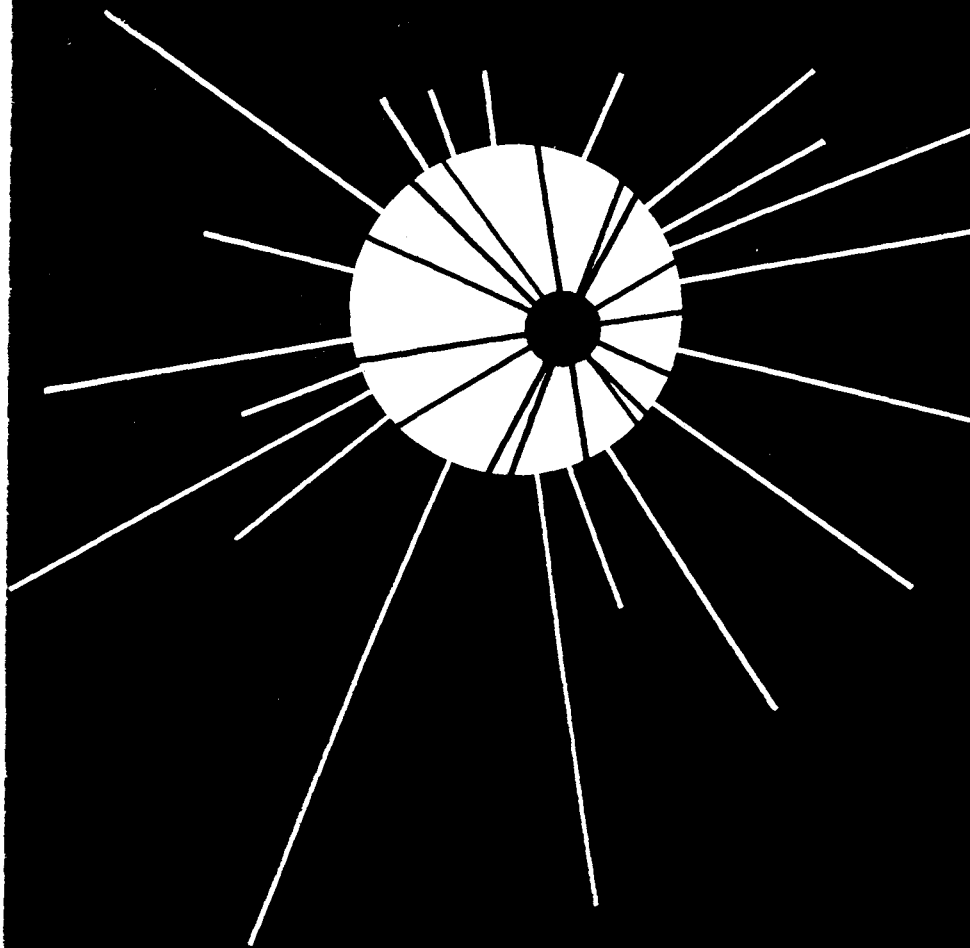
THE



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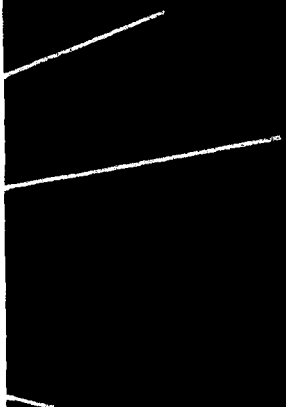
REGION BELTAVAGEN



Death came here v as ?
.. shen For it was only when
Ba ley died that he
began to live

HARLAN ELLISON

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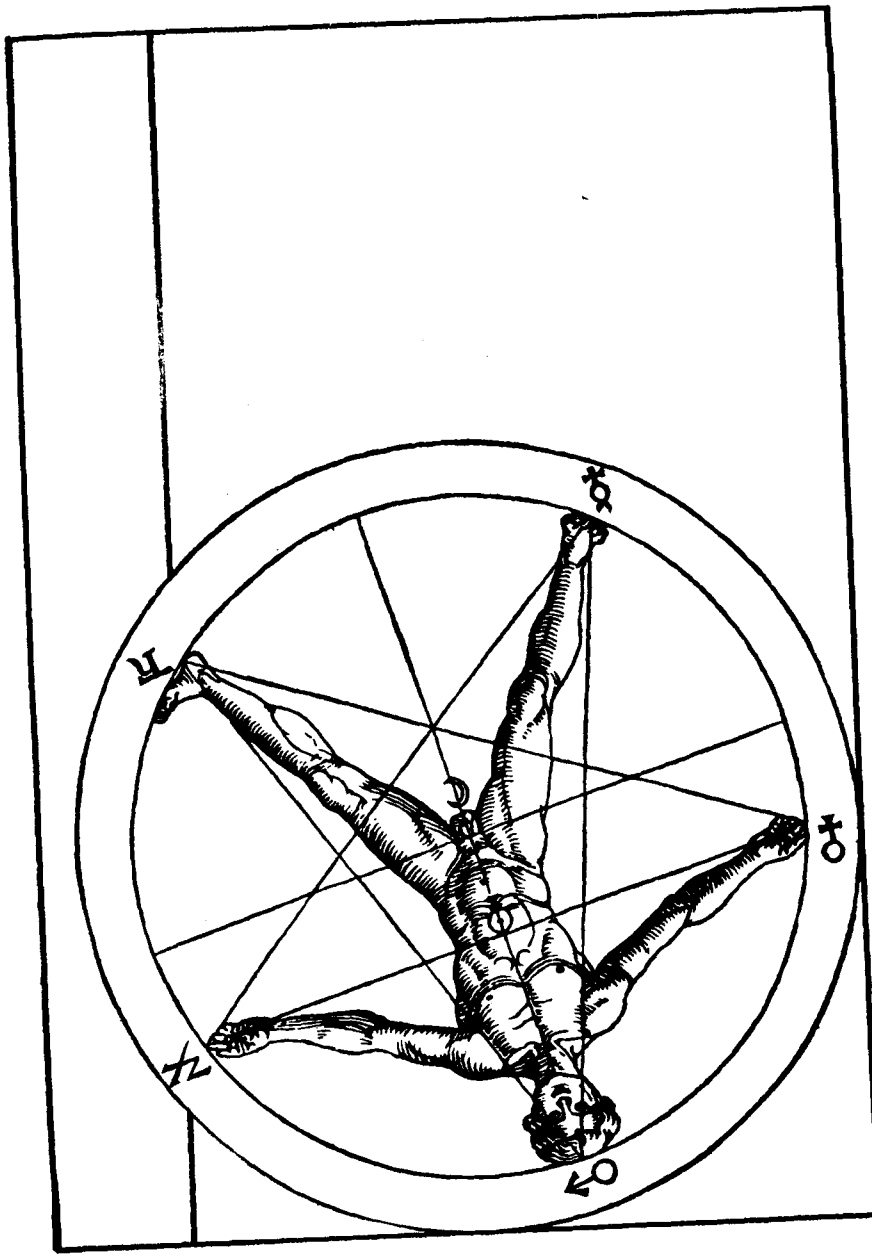

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"Left hand," the thin man said tonelessly. "Wrist up."

William Bailey peeled back his cuff; the thin man put something cold against it, nodded toward the nearest door.

"Through there, first slab on the right," he said, and turned away.

"Just a minute," Bailey started. "I wanted—"

"Let's get going, buddy," the thin man said. "That stuff is fast."

Bailey felt something stab up under his heart. "You mean—you've already . . . that's all there is to it?"

"That's what you came for, right? Slab one, friend. Let's go."

"But—I haven't been here two minutes—"

"Whatta you expect—organ music? Look, pal," the thin man shot a glance at the wall clock, "I'm on my break, know what I mean?"

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"I thought I'd at least have time for . . . for . . ."

"Have a heart, chum. You make it under your own power, I don't have to haul you, see?" The thin man was pushing open the door, urging Bailey through into an odor of chemicals and unlive flesh. In a narrow, curtained alcove, he indicated a padded cot.

"On your back, arms and legs straight out."

Bailey assumed the position, tensed as the thin man began fitting straps over his ankles.

"Relax. It's just if we get a little behind and I don't get back to a client for maybe a couple hours and they stiffen up . . . well, them issue boxes is just the one size, you know what I mean?"

A wave of softness, warmness swept over Bailey as he lay back.

"Hey, you didn't eat nothing the last twelve hours?" The thin man's face was a hazy pink blur.

"I awrrr mmmm," Bailey heard himself say.

"OK, sleep tight, paisan . . ." The thin man's voice boomed and faded. Bailey's last thought as the endless blackness closed in was of the words cut in the granite over the portal to the Euthanasia Center:

". . . send me your tired, your poor, your hopeless, yearning to be free. To them I raise the lamp beside the brazen door . . . ."

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1

DEATH came as merely a hyphen. Life, and the balance of the statement followed instantly. For it was only when Bailey died that he began to live.

Yet he could never have called it "living"; no one who had ever passed that way could have called it "living." It was something else. Something quite

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apart from "death" and something totally unlike "life."

Stars passed through him as he whirled outward.

Blazing and burning, carrying with them their planetary systems, stars and more stars spun through him as though traveling down invisible wires into the dark behind and around him.

Nothing touched him.

They were as dust motes, rushing silently past in incalculable patterns, as Bailey's body grew larger, filled space in defiance of the Law that said two bodies could not coexist in the same space at the same instant. Greater than Earth, greater than its solar system, greater than the galaxy that contained it, Bailey's body swelled and grew and filled the universe from end to end and ballooned back on itself in a slightly flattened circle.

His mind was everywhere.

A string cheese, pulled apart in filaments too thin to be measurable, Bailey's mind was there and there and there. And there.

It was also in the lens of the Succubus.

Murmuring tracery of golden light, a trembling moment of crystal sound. A note, rising and trailing away infinitely high, and followed by another, superimposing in birth even as its predecessor died. The voice of a dream, captured on spiderwebs. There,

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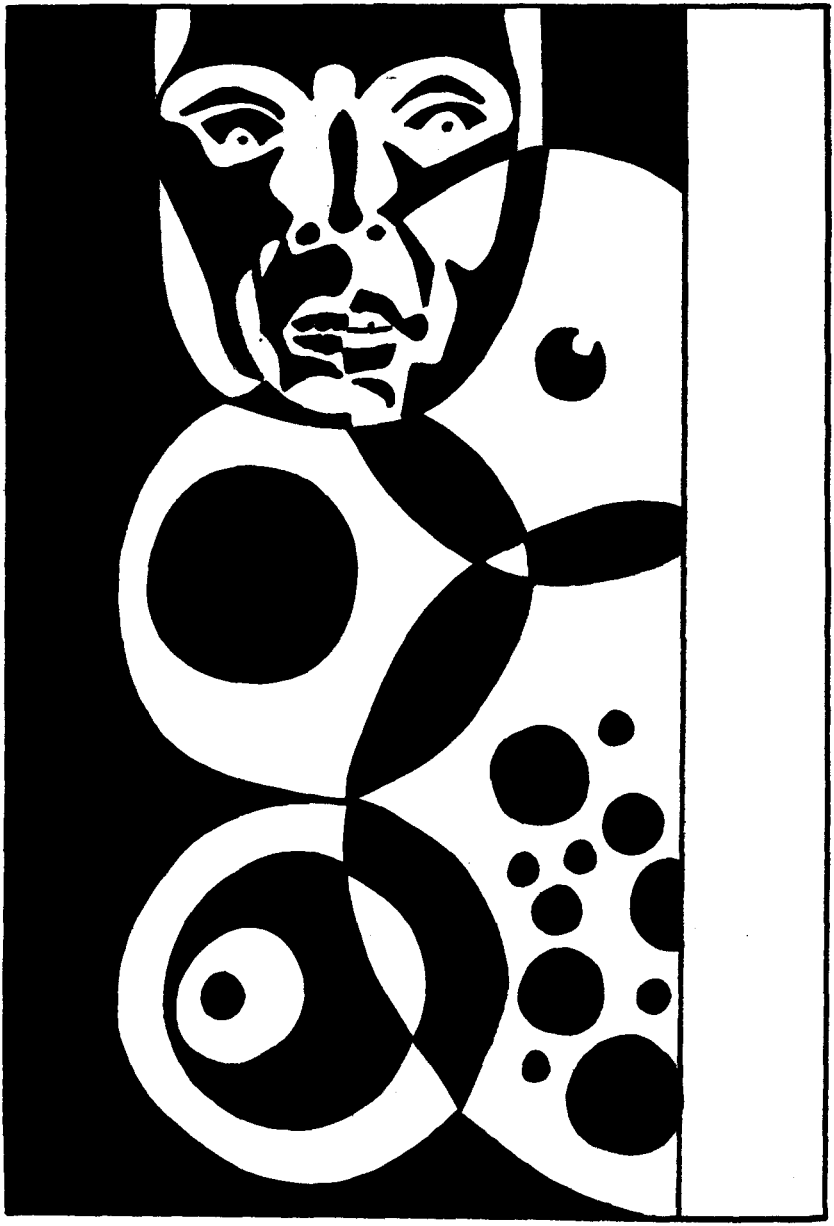

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locked in the heart of an amber perfection, Bailey was snared, caught, trapped, made permanent by a force that allowed his Baileyness to roam unimpeded anywhere and everywhere at the instant of death.

Trapped in the lens of the Succubus.

[Waiting: empty. A mindsnake on a desert world, frying under seven suns, poised in the instant of death; its adversary, a fuzzball of cilia-thin fibers, sparking electrically, moving toward the mindsnake that a moment before had been set to strike and kill and eat. The mindsnake, immobile, empty of thought and empty of patterns of light that confounded its victims in the instants before the killing strike. The fuzzball sparked toward the mindsnake, its fibers casting about across the vaporous desert, picking up the mole sounds of things moving beneath the sand, tasting the air and feeling the heat as it pulsed in and away. It was improbable that a mindsnake would spend all that light-time, luring and intriguing, only at the penultimate moment to back off—no, not back off: shut down. Stop. Halt entirely. But if this was not a trap, if this was not some new tactic only recently learned by the ancient mindsnake, then it had to be an opportunity for the fuzzball. It moved closer. The mindsnake lay empty: waiting.]

Trapped in the lens of the Succubus.

[Waiting: empty. A monstrous head, pale blue and veined, supported atop a swan-neck by an intricate latticework yoke-and-halter. The Senator from Nougul, making his final appeal for the life of his world before the Star Court. Suddenly plunged into silence. No sound, no movement, the tall, emaciated body propped on its seven league crutches, only the trembling of balance—having nothing to do with life

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—reminding the assembled millions that an instant before this husk had contained a pleading eloquence. The fate of a world quivered in a balance no less precarious than that of the Senator. What had happened? The amalgam of wild surmise that grew in the Star Court was scarcely less compelling than had been the original circumstances bringing Nougul to this place, in the care of the words of this Senator. Who now stood, crutched, silent and empty: waiting.

Trapped in the lens of the Succubus.

Waiting: empty. The Warlock of Whirrl, a power of darkness and evil. A force for chaos and destruction. Poised above his runic symbols, his bits of offal, his animal bones, his stringy things without names, quicksudden gone to silence. Eyes devoid of the pulverized starlight that was his sight. Mouth abruptly slack, in a face that had never known slackness. The ewe lamb lay still tied to the obsidian block, the graven knife with its unpleasant figures rampant, still held in the numb hand of the Warlock. And the ceremony was halted. The forces of darkness had come in gathering, had come to their calls, and now they roiled like milk vapor in the air, unable to go, unable to do, loath to abide. While the Warlock of Whirrl, gone from his mind stood frozen and empty: waiting.

Trapped in the lens of the Succubus.

Waiting: empty. A man on Promontory, fifth planet out from the star Proxima Centauri, halted in mid-step. On his way to a bank of controls and a certain button, hidden beneath three security plates. This man, this inestimably valuable kingpin in the machinery of a war, struck dumb, struck blind, in a kind of death—not even waiting for another moment of time. Pulled out of himself by the gravity of non-being, an empty husk, a shell, a dormant thing.

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Poised on the edges of their continents, two massed armies waited for that button to be pushed. And would never be pushed, while this man, this empty and silent man, stood rooted in the sealed underworld bunker where precaution had placed him. Now inaccessible, now inviolate, now untouchable, this man and this war stalemated frozen. While the world around him struggled to move itself a fraction of a thought toward the future, and found itself incapable, hamstrung, empty: waiting.

Trapped in the lens of the Succubus.

And . . .

Waiting: empty. A subaltern, name of Pinkh, lying on his bunk, contemplating his fiftieth assault mission. Suddenly gone. Drained, lifeless, neither dead nor alive. Staring upward at the bulkhead ceiling of his quarters. While beyond his ship raged the Montag-Thil war. Sector 888 of the Galactic Index. Somewhere between the dark star Montag and the Nebula Cluster in Thil Galaxy. Pinkh, limbo-lost and unfeeling, needing the infusion of a soul, the filling up of a life-force. Pinkh, needed in this war more than any other man, though the Thils did not know it . . . until the moment his essence was stolen. Now, Pinkh, lying there one shy of a fifty-score of assault missions. But unable to aid his world. Unable, undead, unalive, empty: waiting.

While Bailey . . .

Floated in a region between. Hummed in a nothingness as great as everywhere. Without substance. Without corporeality. Pure thought, pure energy, pure Bailey. Trapped in the lens of the Succubus.

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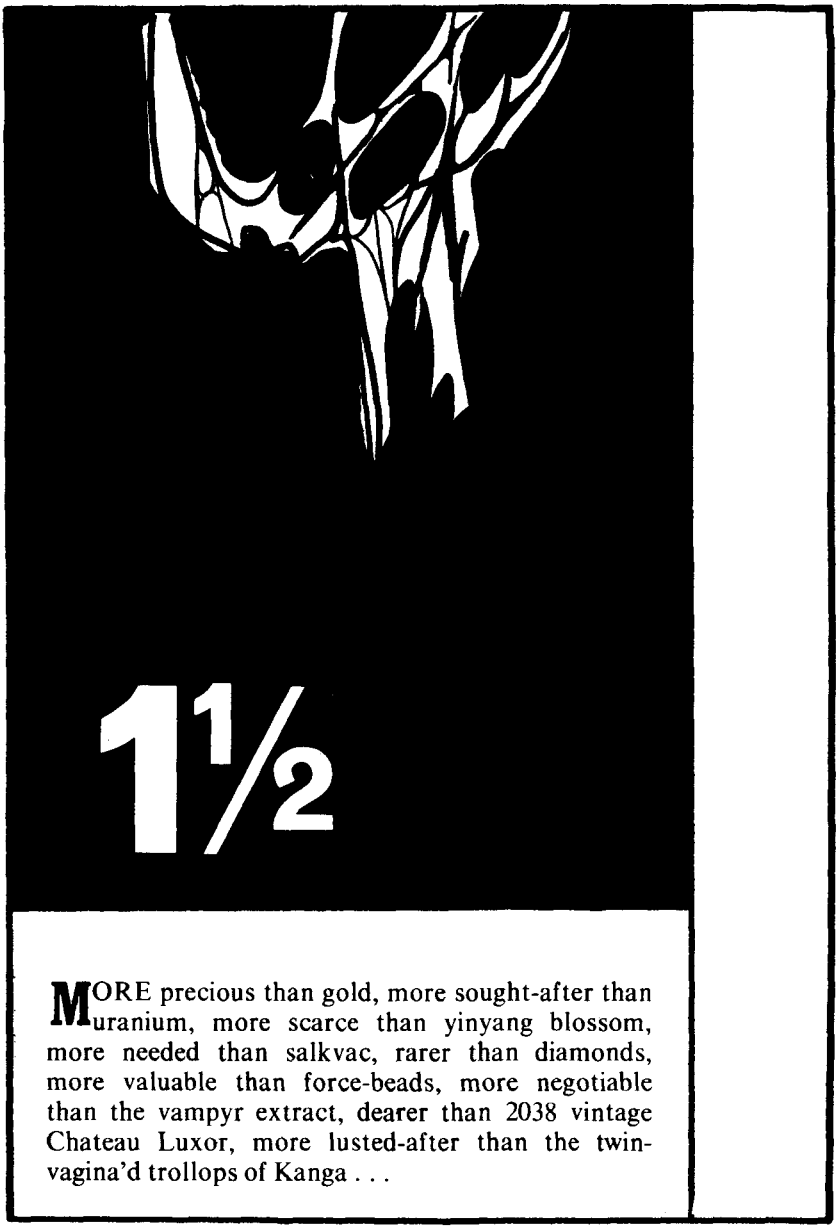

MORE precious than gold, more sought-after than uranium, more scarce than yinyang blossom, more needed than salkvac, rarer than diamonds, more valuable than force-beads, more negotiable than the vampyr extract, dearer than 2038 vintage Chateau Luxor, more lusted-after than the twin-vagina'd trollops of Kanga . . .

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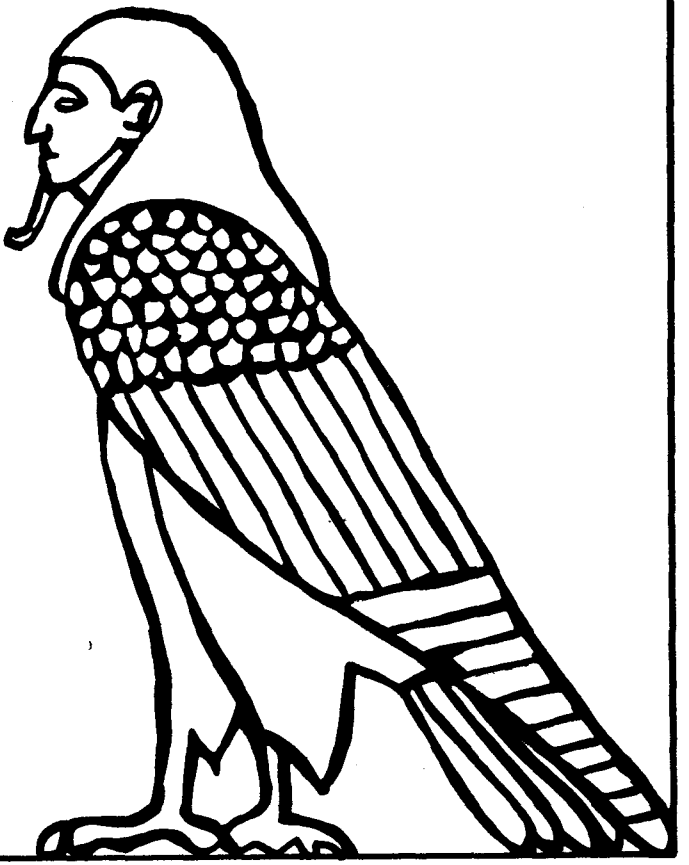
Souls.



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Thefts had begun in earnest five hundred years before. Random thefts. Stolen from the most improbable receptacles. From beasts and men and creatures who had never been thought to possess "souls." Who was stealing them was never known. Far out somewhere, in reaches of space (or not-space) (or the interstices between space and not-space) that had no names, had no dimensions, whose light had never even reached the outmost thin edge of known space, there lived or existed or *were* creatures or things or entities or forces—*someone*—who needed the life-force of the creepers and walkers and lungers and swimmers and fliers who inhabited the known universe. Souls vanished, and the empty husks remained.

Thieves they were called, for no other name applied so well, bore in its single syllable such sadness and sense of resignation. They were called Thieves, and they were never seen, were not understood, had never given a clue to their nature or their purpose or even their method of theft. And so nothing could be done about their depredations. They were as Death: handiwork observed, but a fact of life without recourse to higher authority. Death and the Thieves were final in what they did.

So the known universes—the Star Court and the Galactic Index and the Universal Meridian and the Perseus Confederacy and the Crab Complex—shouldered the reality of what the Thieves did with resignation, and stoicism. No other course was open to them. They could do no other.

But it changed life in the known universe.

It brought about the existence of soul-recruiters, who pandered to the needs of the million billion trillion worlds. Shanghaiers. Grave-robbers of creatures not yet dead. In their way, thieves, even as the Thieves. Beings whose dark powers and abilities enabled them to fill the tables-of-organization of any world with fresh souls from worlds that did not even

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suspect *they* existed, much less the Court, the Index, the Meridian, the Confederacy or the Complex. If a key figure on a fringe world suddenly went limp and soulless, one of the soul-recruiters was contacted and the black traffic was engaged in. Last resort, final contact, most reprehensible but expeditious necessity, they stole and supplied.

One such was the Succubus.

HE WAS gold. And he was dry. These were the only two qualities possessed by the Succubus that could be explicated in human terms. He had once been a member of the dominant race that skimmed across the sand-seas of a tiny planet, fifth from the star-sun labeled Kappel-112 in Canes Venatici. He had long-since ceased to be anything so simply identified.

The path he had taken, light-years long and several hundred Terran-years long, had brought him from the sand-seas and a minimum of "face"—the only term that could even approximate the one measure of wealth his race valued—to a cove of goldness and dryness near the hub of the Crab Complex. His personal worthiness could now be measured only in terms of hundreds of billions of dollars, unquenchable light sufficient to sustain his offspring unto the nine thousandth generation, a name that could only be spoken aloud or in movement by the upper three social sects of the Confederacies races, more "face" than any member of his race had ever possessed . . . more, even, than that held in myth by Yaele.

Gold, dry, and inestimably worthy: the Succubus.

Though his trade was one publicly deplored, there were only seven entities in the known universe who were aware that the Succubus was a soul-recruiter. He kept his two lives forcibly separated.

"Face" and grave-robbing were not compatible.

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He ran a tidy business. Small, with enormous returns. Special souls, selected carefully, no seconds, no hand-me-downs. Quality stock.

And through the seven highly-placed entities who knew him—Nin, FawDawn, Enec-L, Milly(Bas) Kodal, a Plain without a name, Cam Royal and Pl—he was channelled only the loftiest commissions.

He had supplied souls of all sorts in the five hundred years he had been recruiting. Into the empty husk of a master actor on Bolial V. Into the waiting body of a creature that resembled a plant aphid, the figurehead of a coalition labor movement, on Wheechitt Eleven and Wheechitt Thirteen. Into the unmoving form of the soul-emptied daughter of the hereditary ruler of Golaena Prime. Into the untenanted shape of an arcane maguscientist on Donadello III's seventh moon, enabling the five hundred-zodjam religious cycle to progress. Into the lustreless spark of light that sealed the laocoönian group-mind of Orechnaen's Dispassionate Bell-Silver Dichotomy.

Not even the seven who functioned as go-betweens for the Succubus's commissions knew where and how he obtained such fine, raw, unsolidified souls. His competitors dealt almost exclusively in the atrophied, crustaceous souls of beings whose thoughts and beliefs and ideologies were so ingrained that the souls came to their new receptacles already stained and imprinted. But the Succubus . . .

Cleverly-contrived, youthful souls. Hearty souls. Plastic and ready-to-assimilate souls. Lustrous, inventive souls. The finest souls in the known universe.

The Succubus, as determined to excel in his chosen profession as he was to amass "face," had spent the better part of sixty years roaming the outermost fringes of the known universe. He had carefully observed many races, noting for his purpose only those that seemed malleable, pliant, far removed from rigidity.

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He had selected, for his purpose:
The Steechii
Amassanii
Cokoloids
Flashers
Griestaniks
Bunanits
Condolis
Tratravisii
and Humans.

On each planet where these races dominated, he put into effect subtle recruiting systems, wholly congruent with the societies in which they appeared:

The Steechii were given eterna dreamdust.

The Amassanii were given doppelgänger shifting.

The Cokoloids were given the Cult of Rebirth.

The Flashers were given proof of the Hereafter.

The Griestaniks were given ritual mesmeric trances.

The Bunanits were given (imperfect) teleportation.

The Condolis were given an entertainment called Trial by Nightmare Combat.

The Tratravisii were given an underworld motivated by high incentives for kidnapping and mind-blotting. They were also given a wondrous narcotic called Nodabit.

The Humans were given Euthanasia Centers.

And from these diverse channels the Succubus received a steady supply of prime souls. He received Flashers and skimmers and Condolis and ether-breathers and Amassanii and perambulators and Bunanits and gill-creatures and . . .

William Bailey.

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Trapped in the lens of the Succubus.

1¾

BAILEY, cosmic nothingness, electrical potential spread out to the ends of the universe and beyond, nubbin'd his thoughts. Dead. Of that, no doubt. Dead and gone. Back on Earth, lying cold and faintly blue on a slab in the Euthanasia Center. Toes turned up. Eyeballs rolled up in their sockets. Rigid and gone.

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And yet alive. More completely alive than he had ever been, than *any* human being had ever conceived of being. Alive with all of the universe, one with the clamoring stars, brother to the infinite empty spaces, heroic in proportions that even myth could not define.

He knew everything. Everything there had ever been to know, everything that was, everything that would be. Past, present, future . . . all were merged and met in him. He was on a feeder line to the Succubus, waiting to be collected, waiting to be tagged and filed even as his alabaster body back on Earth would be tagged and filed. Waiting to be cross-indexed and shunted off to a waiting empty husk on some far world. All this he knew.

But one thing separated him from the millions of souls that had gone before him.

He didn't want to go.

Infinitely wise, knowing all, Bailey knew every other soul that had gone before had been resigned with soft acceptance to what was to come. It was a new life. A new voyage in another body. And all the others had been fired by curiosity, inveigled by strangeness, wonder-struck with being as big as the known universe and going *somewhere else*.

But not Bailey.

He was rebellious.

He was fired by hatred of the Succubus, inveigled by thoughts of destroying him and his feeder-lines, wonder-struck with being the only one—the *only* one!—who had ever thought of revenge. He was, somehow, strangely, not tuned in with being rebodied, as all the others had been. *Why am I different*? he wondered. And of all the things he knew . . . he did not know the answer to that.

Inverting negatively, atoms expanded to the size of whole galaxies, stretched out membraned, osmotically breathing whole star-systems, inhaling blue-white stars and exhaling quasars, Bailey the known

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universe asked himself yet another question, even more important:

Do I WANT to do something about it?

Passing through a zone of infinite cold, the word came back to him from his own mind in chill icicles of thought:

Yes.

And borne on comets plunging frenziedly through his cosmic body, altering course suddenly and traveling at right angles in defiance of every natural law he had known when "alive," the inevitable question responding to a *yes* asked itself:

Why should I?

Life for Bailey on Earth had been pointless. He had been a man who did not fit. He had been a man driven to the suicide chamber literally by disorientation and frustration.

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neglecting your relaxation periods."

Damn him! Damn him!

"I see here, during the month of September, that you worked overtime at least . . . what is it . . . uh . . . eleven hours."

"Is there a law against that?"

"Oh, no . . . no, of course not. It just seems to us here at the block that you're perhaps, uh, over*do*ing it a bit."

"Working."

"Yes. Working."

"Has my block steward complained? Has my EEG been erratic? Am I being *accused* of something?"

"No, of *course* not! My lord, man, there's no need to be so defensive! We're only trying to find out if something is, well, disturbing you."

If I'd been able to, I'd have killed the sonofabitch; right then and right there. In his conversation grouping. It would have made fine conversation for his office staff. Come in and find him brained to death with his own coffee urn.

"Nothing's disturbing me."

"Then you'll pardon me if I feel it apropos to ask why you aren't taking your proper relaxation periods, Mr. Bailey."

"I feel like keeping busy."

"Ah, but all work and no play—"

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I was called to the office of the Social Director of my residence block. Frankly, I was frightened. I knew I hadn't done anything to be afraid about, but ever since I'd been a child, ever since I'd been called to the office of the school principal, just the being *summoned* had made my gut tight, made me feel like I wanted to go to the bathroom.

He made me wait half an hour, on a bench, damn him, with a gaggle of weirdos who looked like they hadn't had their heads scrubbed and customized in seven months.

Finally, the box called my name and I dropped to his office, and he was sitting in one of those informal conversation-groupings of chairs and coffee table that instantly put me off.

"Mr. Bailey," he said. Smiled. Hearty bastard. I walked over and sat down even before he suggested I sit. He didn't drop the smile for a second. He was up to anything.

"Why don't we get right to it," he said. I smiled back at him, but I felt trapped, really hemmed-in.

"I've been looking at your tag-chart, Mr. Bailey, and well, I hesitate to make any jump conclusions here, but it *appears* you've been

The omnipresent melancholy that had consumed him on an Earth bursting with over-population was something to which he had no desire to return. Then why this frenzy to resist being shunted into the body of a creature undoubtedly living a life more demanding, more exciting—*anything* had to be better than what he'd come from—more *alive*? Why this fanatic need to track back along the feeder-lines to the Succubus, to destroy the one who had saved him from oblivion? Why this need to destroy a creature who was merely fulfilling a necessary operation-of-balance in a universe singularly devoid of balance?

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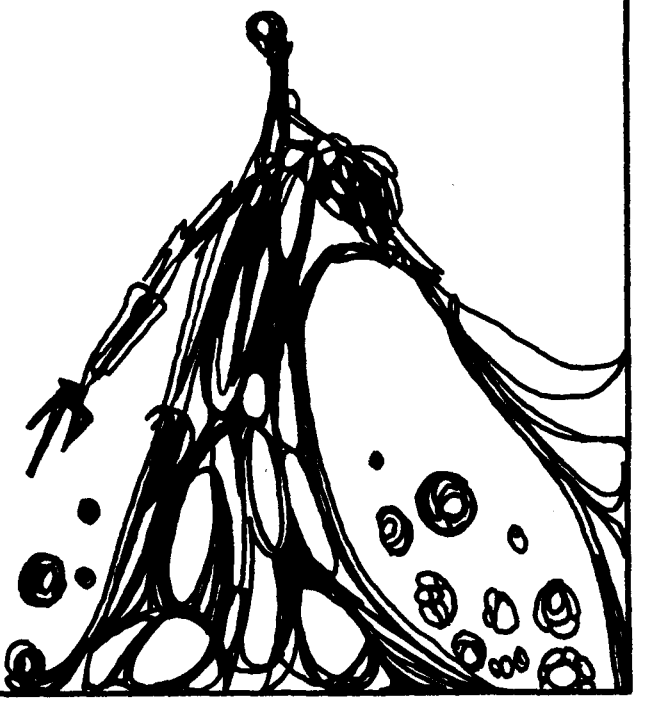
In that thought lay the answer, but he did not have the key. He turned off his thoughts. He was Bailey no more.

And in that instant the Succubus pulled his soul from the file and sent it where it was needed. He was certainly Bailey no more.



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2

SUBALTERN PINKH squirmed on his spike-palette, and opened his eye. His back was stiff. He turned, letting the invigorating short-spikes tickle his flesh through the heavy mat of fur. His mouth felt dry and loamy.

It was the morning of his fiftieth assault mission. Or was it? He seemed to remember lying down for a night's sleep. . .and then a very long dream without substance. It had been all black and empty; hardly

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something the organizer would have programmed. It must have malfunctioned.

He slid sidewise on the spike-palette, and dropped his enormous furred legs over the side. As his paws touched the tiles a whirring from the wall preceded the toilet facility's appearance. It swiveled into view, and Pinkh looked at himself in the full-length mirror. He looked all right. Dream. Bad dream.

The huge, bearlike subaltern shoved off the bed, stood to his full seven feet, and lumbered into the duster. The soothing powders cleansed away his sleep-fatigue and he emerged, blue pelt glistening, with bad dreams almost entirely dusted away. Almost. Entirely. He had a lingering feeling of having been. . .somewhat. . .*larger*. . .

The briefing colors washed across the walls, and Pinkh hurriedly attached his ribbons. It was informalwear today. Three yellows, three ochres, three whites and an ego blue.

He went downtunnel to the briefing section, and prayed. All around him his sortie partners were on their backs, staring up at the sky dome and the random (programmed) patterns of stars in their religious significances. Montag's Lord of Propriety had programmed success for today's mission. The stars swirled and shaped themselves and the portents were reassuring to Pinkh and his fellows.

The Montag-Thil War had been raging for almost one hundred years, and it seemed close to ending. The dark star Montag and the Nebula Cluster in Thil Galaxy had thrown their might against each other for a century; the people themselves were weary of war. It would end soon. One or the other would make a mistake, the opponent would take the advantage, and the strike toward peace would follow immediately. It was merely a matter of time. The assault troops—especially Pinkh, a planetary hero—were suffused with a feeling of importance, a sense of the relevance of what they were doing. Out to kill,

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certainly, but with the sure knowledge that they were working toward a worthwhile goal. Through death, to life. The portents had told them again and again, these last months, that this was the case.

The sky dome turned golden and the stars vanished. The assault troops sat up on the floor, awaited their briefing.

It was Pinkh's fiftieth mission.

His great yellow eye looked around the briefing room. There were more young troopers this mission. In fact. . .he was the only veteran. It seemed strange.

Could Montag's Lord of Propriety have planned it this way? But where were Andakh and Melnakh and Gorekh? They'd been here yesterday.

Was it just yesterday?

He had a strange memory of having been—asleep?—away?—unconscious?—what?—something. As though more than one day had passed since his last mission. He leaned across to the young trooper on his right and placed a paw flat on the other's. "What day is today?" The trooper flexed palm and answered, with a note of curiosity in his voice, "It's Former. The ninth." Pinkh was startled. "What cycle?" he asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Third," the young trooper said.

The briefing officer entered at that moment, and Pinkh had no time to marvel that it was *not* the next day, but a full cycle later. Where had the days gone? What had happened to him? Had Gorekh and the others been lost in sorties? Had he been wounded, sent to repair and only now been remanded to duty? Had he been wounded and suffered amnesia? He remembered a Lance Corporal in the Throbbing Battalion who had been seared and lost his memory. They had sent him back to Montag, where he had been blessed by the Lord of Propriety himself. What had happened to him?

Strange memories—not his own, all the wrong colors, weights and tones wholly alien—kept press-

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ing against the bones in his forehead.

He was listening to the briefing officer, but also hearing an undertone. Another voice entirely. Coming from some other place he could not locate.

> ■■■■■ You great ugly fur-thing, you! Wake up, look around you. One hundred years, slaughtering. Why can't you see what's being done to you? How dumb can you be? The Lords of Propriety; they set you up. Yeah, *you*, Pinkh! Listen to me. You can't block me out. . .you'll hear me. Bailey. You're the one, Pinkh, the special one. They trained you for what's coming up. . .no, don't block me out, you imbecile. . .don' ■■■■■ I'll be here, you can'■■■■■

The background noise went on, but he would not listen. It was sacrilegious. Saying things about the Lord of Propriety. Even the Thil Lord of Propriety was sacrosanct in Pinkh's mind. Even though they were at war, the two Lords were eternally locked together in holiness. To blaspheme even the enemy's Lord was unthinkable.

Yet he had thought it.

He shuddered with the enormity of what had passed in his thoughts, and knew he could never go to release and speak of it. He would submerge the memory, and pay strict attention to the briefing officer who was

"This cycle's mission is a straightforward one. You will be under the direct linkage of Subaltern Pinkh, whose reputation is known to all of you."

Pinkh inclined with the humbleness movement.

"You will drive directly to the Thil labyrinth, chivvy and harass a path to Groundworld, and there level as many targets-of-opportunity as you are able, before you're destroyed. After this briefing you will re-assemble with your sortie leaders and fully familiarize yourselves with the target-cubes the Lord has commanded to be constructed."

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He paused, and stared directly at Pinkh, his golden eye gone to pinkness with age and dissipation. But what he said was for all of the sappers. "There is one target you will *not* strike. It is the Maze of the Thil Lord of Propriety. This is irrevocable. You will not, repeat *not* strike near the Maze of the Lord."

Pinkh felt a leap of pleasure. This was the final strike. It was preamble to peace. A suicide mission; he ran eleven thankfulness prayers through his mind. It was the dawn of a new day for Montag and Thil. The Lords of Propriety were good. The Lords held all cupped in their holiness.

Yet he had thought the unthinkable.

"You will be under the direct linkage of Subaltern Pinkh," the briefing officer said again. Then, kneeling and passing down the rows of sappers, he palmed good death with honor to each of them. When he reached Pinkh, he stared at him balefully for a long instant, as though wanting to speak. But the moment passed, he rose, and left the chamber.

They went into small groups with the sortie leaders and examined the target cubes. Pinkh went directly to the briefing officer's cubicle and waited patiently till the older Montagasque's prayers were completed.

When his eye cleared, he stared at Pinkh.

"A path through the labyrinth has been cleared."

"What will we be using?"

"Reclaimed sortie craft. They have all been outfitted with diversionary equipment."

"Linkage level?"

"They tell me a high six."

"They *tell* you?" He regretted the tone even as he spoke.

The briefing officer looked surprised. As if his desk had coughed. He did not speak, but stared at Pinkh with the same baleful stare the Subaltern had seen before.

"Recite your catechism," the briefing officer said, finally.

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Pinkh settled back slowly on his haunches, ponderous weight downdropping with grace. Then:

"Free flowing, free flowing, all flows
"From the Lords, all free, all fullness,
"Flowing from the Lords.
"What will I do
"What will I do
"What will I do without my Lords?

"Honor in the dying, rest is honor, all honor
"From the Lords, all rest, all honoring,
"To honor my Lords.
"This I will do
"This I will do
"I will live when I die for my Lords."

And it was between the First and Second Sacredness that the darkness came to Pinkh. He saw the briefing officer come toward him, reach a great palm toward him, and there was darkness. . .the same sort of darkness from which he had risen in his own cubicle before the briefing. Yet, not the same. *That* darkness had been total, endless, with the feeling that he was. . .somehow. . .larger. . .greater. . .as big as all space. . .

And this darkness was like being turned off. He could not think, could not even think that he was unthinking. He was cold, and not there. Simply: not there.

Then, as if it had not happened, he was back in the briefing officer's cubicle, the great bearlike shape was moving back from him, and he was reciting the Second Sacredness of his catechism.

What had happened. . .he did not know.

"Here are your course coordinates," the briefing officer said. He extracted the spool from his pouch

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and gave it to Pinkh. The subaltern marveled again at how old the briefing officer must be: the hair of his chest was almost gray.

"Sir," Pinkh began. Then stopped. The briefing officer raised a palm. "I understand, Subaltern. Even to the most reverent among us there come moments of confusion." Pinkh smiled. He *did* understand.

"Lords," Pinkh said, palming the briefing officer with fullness and propriety.

"Lords," he replied, palming honor in the dying.

Pinkh left the briefing officer's cubicle and went to his own place.

As soon as he was certain the subaltern was gone, the briefing officer, who was *very* old, linked-up with someone else, far away; and he told him things.

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FIRST, they melted the gelatin around him. It was hardly gelatin, but it had come to be called jell by the sappers, and the word had stuck. As the gelatin stuck. Face protected, he lay in the ten troughs, in sequence, getting the gelatinous substance melted around him. Finally, pincers that had been carefully padded lifted him from the tenth trough, and slid him

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along the track to his sortie craft. Once inside the pilot country, stretched out on his stomach, he felt the two hundred wires insert themselves into the jell, into the fur, into his body. The brain-waves were the last to fix.

As each wire hissed from its spool and locked onto the skull-contacts, Pinkh felt himself go a little more to integration with the craft. At last, the final wire tipped on and Pinkh was metalflesh, bulkheadskin, eyescanners, bonerivets, plasticartilege, artery/ventricle/instep/neuron/transistors,

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all of him as one, totality, metal-man, furred-vessel, essence of mechanism, soul of inanimate, life in force-drive, linkage of mind with power plant. Pinkh the ship. Sortie Craft 90 named Pinkh.

And the others: linked to him.

Seventy sappers, each encased in jell, each wired up, each a mind to its sortie craft. Seventy, linked in telepathically with Pinkh, and Pinkh linked into his own craft, and all of them instrumentalities of the Lord of Propriety.

The great carrier wing that bore them made escape orbit and winked out of normal space.

Here • Not Here.

In an instant gone.

(Gone where!?!)

Inverspace.

Through the gully of inverspace to wink into existence once again at the outermost edge of the Thil labyrinth.

Not Here • Here.

Confronting a fortified tundra of space criss-

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crossed by deadly lines of force. A cosmic fireworks display. A cat's cradle of vanishing, appearing and disappearing threads of a million colors; each one receptive to all the others. Cross one, break one, interpose. . .and suddenly uncountable others home in. Deadly ones. Seeking ones. Stunners and drainers and leakers and burners. The Thil labyrinth.

Seventy-one sortie craft hung quivering—the last of the inverspace coronas trembling off and gone. Through the tracery of force-lines the million stars of the Thil Galaxy burned with the quiet reserve of ice crystals. And there, in the center, the Nebula Cluster. And there, in the center of the Cluster, Groundworld.

"Link in with me."

Pinkh's command fled and found them. Seventy beastcraft tastes, sounds, scents, touches came back to Pinkh. His sappers were linked in.

"A path has been cleared through the labyrinth for us. Follow. And trust. Honor."

"In the dying," came back the response, from seventy minds of flesh-and-metal.

They moved forward. Strung out like fish of metal with minds linked by thought, they surged forward following the lead craft. Into the labyrinth. Color burned and boiled past, silently sizzling in the vacuum. Pinkh detected murmurs of panic, quelled them with a damping thought of his own. Images of the still pools of Dusnadare, of deep sighs after a full meal, of Lord-worship during the days of First Fullness. Trembling back to him, their minds quieted. And the color beams whipped past on all sides, without up or down or distance. But never touching them.

Time had no meaning. Fused into flesh/metal, the sortie craft followed the secret path that had been cleared for them through the impenetrable labyrinth.

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Pinkh had one vagrant thought: *Who cleared this for us?*

And a voice from somewhere far away, a voice that was his own, yet someone else's—the voice of a someone who called himself a bailey—said, *That's it! Keep thinking what they don't want you to think.*

But he put the thoughts from him, and time wearied itself and succumbed, and finally they were there. In the exact heart of the Nebula Cluster in Thil Galaxy.

Groundworld lay fifth from the source star, the home sun that had nurtured the powerful Thil race till it could explode outward.

"Link in to the sixth power," Pinkh commanded.

They linked. He spent some moments reinforcing his command splices, making the interties foolproof and trigger-responsive. Then he made a prayer, and they went in.

Why am I locking them in so close, Pinkh wondered, damping the thought before it could pass along the lines to his sappers. *What am I trying to conceal? Why do I need such repressive control? What am I trying to avert?*

Pinkh's skull thundered with pain. Two minds were at war inside him, he knew that. He *SUDDENLY* knew it.

Who is that?

It's me, you clown!

Get out! I'm on a mission. . .it's import—

It's a fraud! They've prog—

Get out of my head listen to me you idiot I'm trying to tell you something you need to know I won't listen I'll override you I'll block you I'll damp you no listen don't do that I've been someplace you haven't been and I can tell you about the Lords oh this can't be happening to me not to me I'm a devout man fuck that garbage listen to me they lost you man they lost you to a soul stealer and they had to get you back because you were their specially programmed killer they want you to Lord oh Lord of Propriety

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hear me now hear me your most devout worshipper forgive these blasphemous thoughts I can't control you any more you idiot I'm fading fading fading Lord oh Lord hear me I wish only to serve you. Only to suffer the honor in the dying.

Peace through death. I am the instrumentality of the Lords. I know what I must do.

That's what I'm trying to tell *you. . .*

And then he was gone in the mire at the bottom of Pinkh's mind. They were going in.

THEY came down, straight down past the seven moons, broke through the cloud cover, leveled out in a delta wing formation and streaked toward the larger of the two continents that formed ninety per cent of Groundworld's land mass. Pinkh kept them at supersonic speed, blurring, and drove a thought out to his sappers: "We'll drop straight down below a thousand feet and give them the shock wave. Hold till I tell you to level off."

They were passing over a string of islands—causeway-linked beads in a pea-green sea—each one covered from shore to shore with teeming housing dorms that commuted their residents to the main continents and the complexes of high-rise bureaucratic towers.

"Dive!" Pinkh ordered.

The formation angled sharply forward, as though it was hung on puppet strings, then fell straight down.

The metalflesh of Pinkh's ship-hide began to heat.

Overlapping armadillo plates groaned; Pinkh pushed their speed; force-bead mountings lubricated themselves, went dry, lubricated again; they dropped down; follicle thin fissures were grooved in the bubble surfaces; sappers began to register fear, Pinkh locked them tighter; instruments coded off the far right and

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refused to register; the island-chain flew up toward them; pressure in the gelatin trough flattened them with g's; now there was enough atmosphere to scream past their sortie craft and it whistled, shrilled, howled, built and climbed; gimbal-tracks rasped in their mountings; down and down they plunged, seemingly bent on thundering into the islands of Groundworld; "Sir! Sir!"; "Hold steady, not yet... not yet...I'll tell you when...not yet..."

Pushing an enormous bubble of pressurized air before them, the delta wing formation wailed straight down toward the specks of islands that became dots, became buttons, became masses, became everything as they rushed up and filled the bubble sights from side to side—

"Level out! *Now*! Do it, do it, *level now*!"

And they pulled out, leveled off and shot away. The bubble of air, enormous, solid as an asteroid, thundering down unchecked...hit struck burst broke with devastating results. Pinkh's sortie craft plunged away, and in their wake they left exploding cities, great structures erupting, others trembling, shuddering, then caving in on themselves. The shock wave hit and spread outward from shore to shore. Mountains of plasteel and lathite volcano'd in blossoms of flame and flesh. The blast-pit created by the air bubble struck to the core of the island-chain. A tidal wave rose like some prehistoric leviathan and boiled over one entire spot of land. Another island broke up and sank almost at once. Fire and walls of plasteel crushed and destroyed after the shock wave.

The residence islands were leveled as Pinkh's sortie craft vanished over the horizon, still traveling at supersonic speed.

They passed beyond the island-chain, leaving in their wake dust and death, death and ruin, ruin and fire.

"Through death to peace," Pinkh sent.

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"Honor," they responded, as one.

(Far away on Groundworld, a traitor smiled.)

(In a Maze, a Lord sat with antennae twined, waiting.)

(Flesh and metal eased.)

(In ruins, a baby whose exoskeleton had been crushed, crawled toward the pulsing innards of its mother.)

(Seven moons swung in their orbits.)

(A briefing officer on Montag knew it was full, golden.)

Oh, Lords, what I have done, I have done for you.

Wake up. Will you wake up, Pinkh! The mission is—

The other thing, the bailey, was wrenching at him, poking its head up out of the slime. He thrust it back down firmly. And made a prayer.

"Sir," the thought of one of his sappers came back along the intertie line, "did you say something?"

"Nothing," Pinkh said. "Keep in formation."

He locked them in even tighter, screwing them down with mental shackles till they gasped.

The pressure was building.

A six-power linkup, and the pressure was building.

I am a hero, Pinkh thought, *I can do it*.

Then they were flashing across the Greater Ocean and it blurred into an endless carpet of thick heaving green; Pinkh felt sick watching it whip by beneath him; he went deeper into ship and the vessel felt no sickness. He fed the stability of nausea-submerged along the interties.

They were met by the Thil inner defense line over empty ocean. First came the sea-breathers but they fell short when Pinkh ordered his covey to lift for three thousand feet. They leveled off just as the beaks swooped down in their land-to-sea parabolas. Two of them snouted and perceived the range, even as they were viciously beamed into their component parts by Pinkh's outermost sappers. But they'd already fed back the trajectories, and suddenly the sky

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above them was black with the blackmetal bodies of beaks, flapping, dropping, squalling as they cascaded into the center of the formation. Pinkh felt sappers vanish from the lineup and fed the unused power along other lines, pulling the survivors tighter under his control. "Form a sweep," he commanded.

The formation re-grouped and rolled in a graceful gull-wing maneuver that brought them craft-to-craft in a fan. "Plus!" Pinkh ordered, cutting in—with a thought—the imploding beam. The beams of each sortie craft fanned out, overlapping, making an impenetrable wall of deadly force. The beaks came whirling back up and careened across the formation's path. Creatures of metal and mindlessness. Wheels and carapaces. Blackness and berserk rage. Hundreds. Entire eyries.

When they struck the soft pink fan of the overlapping implosion beams, they whoofed in on themselves, dropped instantly.

The formation surged forward.

Then they were over the main continent. Rising from the exact center was the gigantic mountain atop which the Thil Lord of Propriety lived in his Maze.

"Attack! Targets of opportunity!" Pinkh commanded, sending impelling power along the linkup. His metal hide itched. His eyeball sensors watered. In they went, again.

"Do not strike at the Lord's Maze," one of the sappers thought

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AND PINKH
THREW UP!!
A WALL OF!
THOUGHT !!!
THAT DREW
THE !!!!!!!!!!!
THOUGHT!!!
OFF THE!!!!!
LINK UP SO
IT DID!!!!!!!!
NOT REACH
THE OTHER
SAPPERS !!!!
BUT HIT!!!!!!
THE WALL!!
AND BROKE
LIKE FOAM!

. . . ezam sdrol eht ta ekirts ton od

Why did I do that? We were briefed not to attack the Lord's Maze. It would be unthinkable to attack the Lord's Maze. It would precipitate even greater war than before. The war would *never* end. Why did I stop my sapper from reiterating the order? And why haven't *I* told them not to do it? It was stressed at the briefing. They're linked in so very tightly, they'd obey in a moment—anything I said. What is happening? I'm heading for the mountain! Lord!

Listen to me, Pinkh. This war has been maintained by the Lords of Propriety for a hundred years. Why do you think it was made heresy to even think negatively about the opposing Lord? They keep it going, to feed off it. Whatever they are, these Lords, they come from the same pocket universe and they live off the energy of men at war. They must ***keep the war going or they'll die. They programmed you to be their secret weapon. The war was reaching a stage where both Montag and Thil want peace, and the***

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Lords can't have that. Whatever they are, Pinkh, whatever kind of creature they are, wherever they come from, for over a hundred years they've held your two galaxies in their hands, and they've used you. The Lord isn't in his Maze, Pinkh. He's safe somewhere else. But they planned it between them. They knew if a Montagasque sortie penetrated to Groundworld and struck the Maze, it would keep the war going indefinitely. So they programmed you, Pinkh. But before they could use you, your soul was stolen. They put my soul in you, a man of Earth, Pinkh. You don't even know where Earth is, but my name is Bailey. I've been trying to reach through to you. But you always shut me out—they had you programmed too well. But with the linkup pressure, you don't have the strength to keep me out, and I've got to let you know you're programmed to strike the Maze. You can stop it, Pinkh. You can avoid it all. You can end this war. You have it within your power, Pinkh. Don't strike the Maze. I'll re-direct you. Strike where the Lords are hiding. You can rid your galaxies of them, Pinkh. Don't let them kill you. Who do you think arranged for the path through the labyrinth? Why do you think there wasn't more effective resistance? They wanted *you to get through. To commit the one crime they could not forgive.*

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The words reverberated in Pinkh's head as his sortie craft followed him in a tight wedge, straight for the Maze of the Lord.

"I—no, I—" Pinkh could not force thoughts out to his sappers. He was snapped shut. His mind was aching, the sound of straining and creaking, the buildings on the island-chain ready to crumble. Bailey inside, Pinkh inside, the programming of the Lords inside. . .all of them pulling at the fiber of Pinkh's mind.

For an instant the programming took precedence. "New directives. Override previous orders. Follow me in!"

They dove straight for the Maze.

No, Pinkh, fight it! Fight it and pull out. I'll show you where they're hiding. You can end this war!

The programming phasing was interrupted, Pinkh abruptly opened his great golden eye, his mind synched in even more tightly with his ship, and at that instant he knew the voice in his head was telling him the truth. He *remembered*:

Remembered the endless sessions.

Remembered the conditioning.

Remembered the programming.

Knew he had been duped.

Knew he was not a hero.

Knew he had to pull out of this dive.

Knew that at last *he* could bring peace to both galaxies.

He started to think *pull out, override* and fire it down the remaining linkup interties. . .

And the Lords of Propriety, who left very little to chance, who had followed Pinkh all the way, contacted the Succubus, complained of the merchandise they had bought, demanded it be returned. . .

Bailey's soul was wrenched from the body of Pinkh. The subaltern's body went rigid inside its jell trough, and, soulless, empty, rigid, the sortie craft

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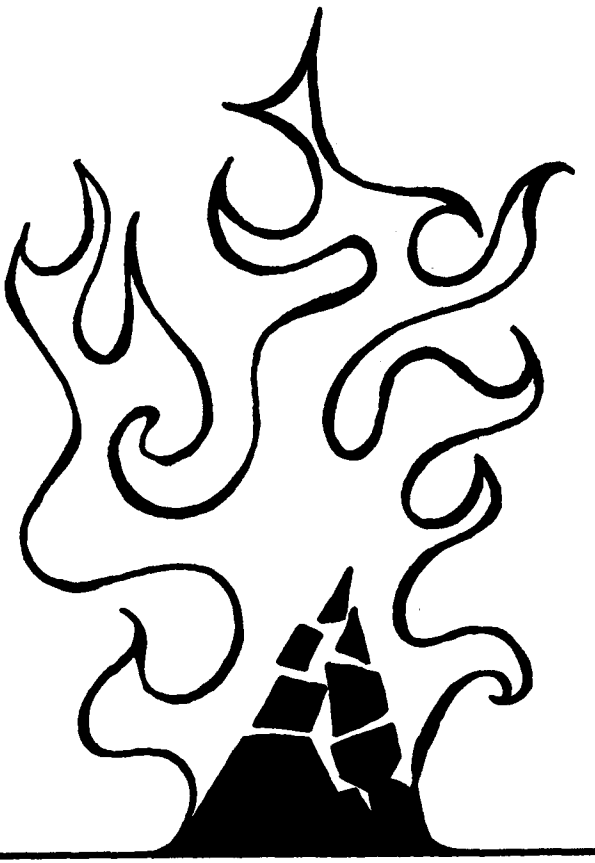
plunged into the mountaintop where the empty Maze stood. It was followed by the rest of the sortie craft.

The mountain itself erupted in a pillar of flame and rock and plasteel.

One hundred years of war was only the beginning.

Somewhere, hidden, the Lords of Propriety—umbilicus-joined with delight shocks spurting softly pink along the flesh-linkage joining them—began their renewed gluttonous feeding.



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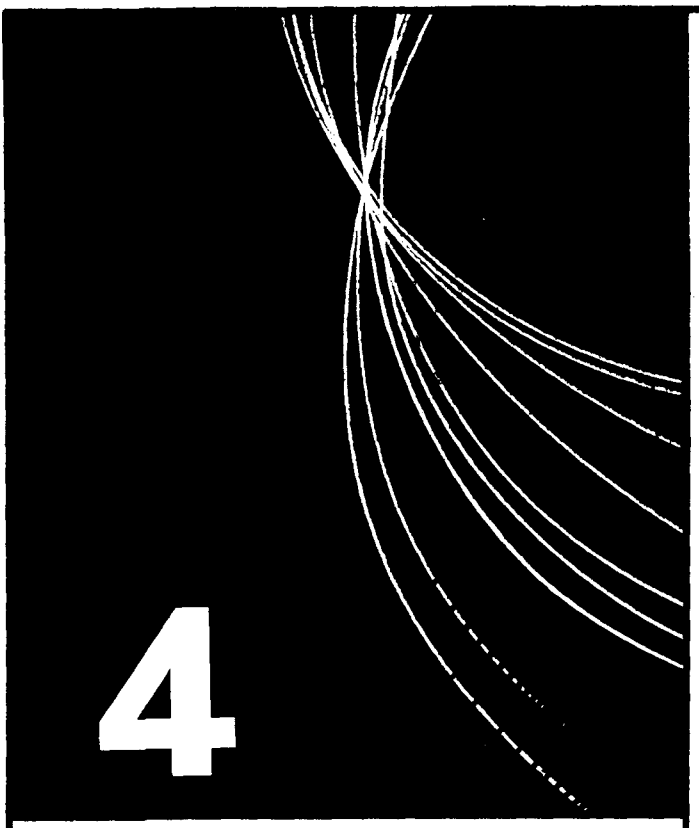

4

BAILEY was whirled out of the Montagasque subaltern's body. His soul went shooting away on an asymptotic curve, back along the feeder-lines, to the soul files of the Succubus.

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5

THIS is what it was like to be in the soul station. Round. Weighted with the scent of grass. Perilous in that the music was dynamically contracting: souls had occasionally become too enriched and had gone flat and flaccid.

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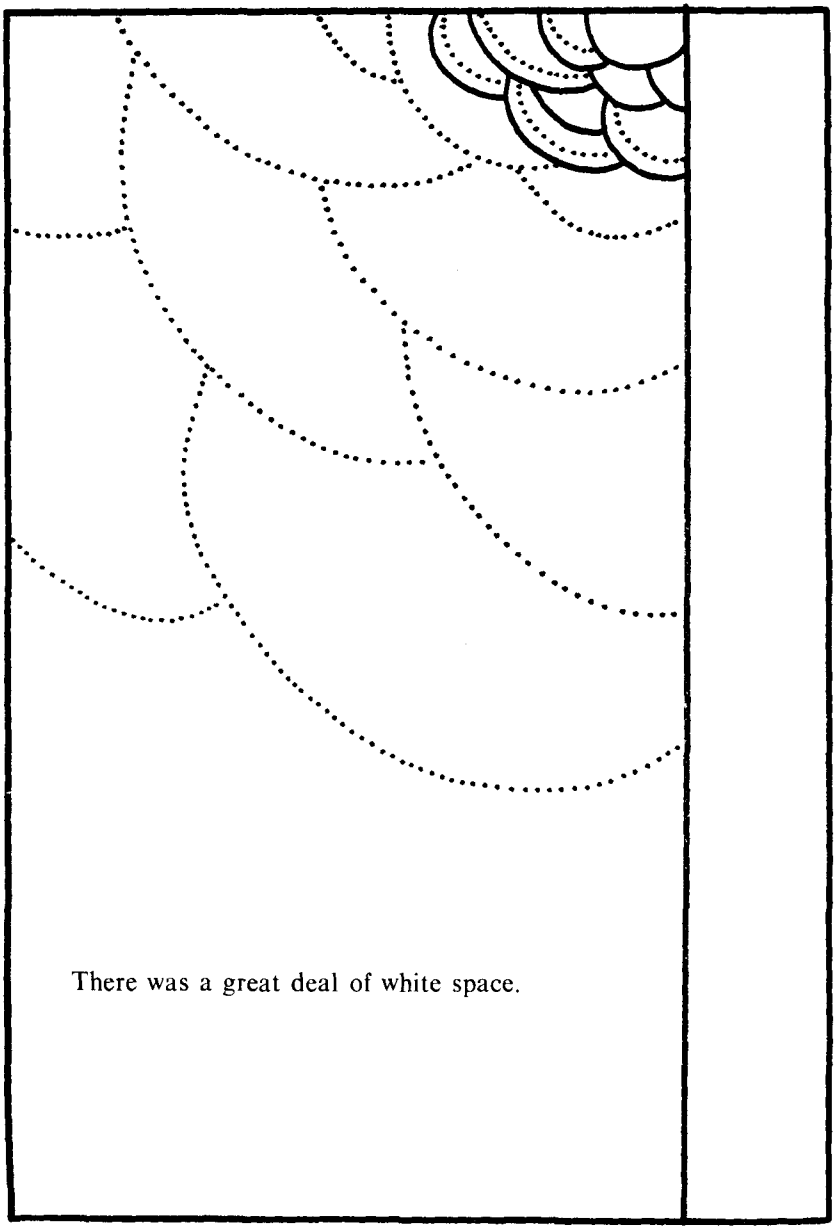

There was a great deal of white space.

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Nothing was
ranked, therefore nothing could be found in the same place twice; yet it didn't matter, for the Succubus had only to focus his lens and the item trembled into a special awareness.

Bailey spent perhaps twelve minutes reliving himself as a collapsing star then revolved his interfaces and masturbated as Anne Boleyn.

He savored mint where it smells most poignant, from deep in the shallow earth through the roots of the plant, then extended himself, extruded himself through an ice crystal and lit the far massif of the highest mountain on an onyx asteroid—recreating The Last Supper in chiaroscuro.

He burned for seventeen hundred years as the illuminated letter "B" on the first stanza of a forbidden enchantment in a papyrus volume used to summon up the imp James Fenimore Cooper then stood outside himself and considered his eyes and their hundred thousand bee-facets.

He allowed himself to be born from the womb of a tree sloth and flickered into rain that deluged a planet of coal for ten thousand years. And he beamed. And he sorrowed.

Bailey, all Bailey, soul once more, free as all the universes, threw himself toward the furthermost edge of the slightly flattened parabola that comprised the dark. He filled the dark with deeper darkness and bathed in fountains of brown wildflowers. Circles of coruscating violet streamed from his fingertips, from the tip of his nose, from his genitals, from the tiniest fibrilating fibers of hair that coated him. He shed water and hummed.

Then the Succubus drew him beneath the lens.

And Bailey was sent out once more.

Waste not, want not.

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6

HE WAS just under a foot tall. He was covered with blue fur. He had a ring of eyes that circled his head. He had eight legs. He smelled of fish. He was low to the ground and he moved very fast.

He was a stalker-cat, and he was first off the survey ship on Belial. The others followed, but not too soon. They always waited for the cat to do its work.

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It was safer that way. The Filonii had found that out in ten thousand years of exploring their universe. The cats did the first work, then the Filonii did theirs. It was the best way to rule a universe.

Belial was a forest world. Covered in long continents that ran from pole-to-pole with feathertop trees, it was ripe for discovery.

Bailey looked out of his thirty eyes, seeing around himself in a full 360° spectrum. Seeing all the way up into the ulta-violet, seeing all the way down into the infra-red. The forest was silent. Absolutely no sound. Bailey, the cat, would have heard a sound, had there been a sound. But there was no sound.

No birds, no insects, no animals, not even the whispering of the feathertop trees as they struggled toward the bright hot-white sun. It was incredibly silent.

Bailey said so.

The Filonii went to a condition red.

No world is silent. And a forest world is *always* noisy. But this one was silent.

They were out there, waiting. Watching the great ship and the small stalker-cat that had emerged from it.

Who they were, the cat, and the Filonii did not know. But they were there, and they were waiting for the invaders to make the first move. The stalker-cat glided forward.

Bailey felt presences. Deep in the forest, deeper than he knew he could prowl with impunity. They were in there, watching him as he moved forward. But he was a cat, and if he was to get his fish, he would work. The Filonii were watching. *Them*, in there, back in the trees, *they* were watching. *It's a bad life*, he thought. *The life of a cat is a nasty, dirty, bad one.*

Bailey was not the first cat to have ever thought that thought. It was the litany of the stalker-cats.

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They knew their place, had always known it, but that was the way it was; it was the way it had always been. The Filonii ruled, and the cats worked. And the universe became theirs.

Yet it wasn't shared. It was the Filonii universe, and the stalker-cats were hired help.

The fine mesh cap that covered the top and back of the cat's head glowed with a faint but discernible halo. The sunbeams through which he passed caught at the gold filaments of the cap and sent sparkling radiations back toward the ship. The ship stood in the center of the blasted area it had cleared for its prime base.

Inside the ship, the team of Filonii ecologists sat in front of the many process screens and saw through the eyes of the stalker-cat. They murmured to one another as first one, then another, then another saw something of interest. "Cat, lad," one of them said softly, "still no sound?"

"Nothing yet, Brewer. But I can feel them watching."

One of the other ecologists leaned forward. The entire wall behind the hundred screens was a pulsing membrane. Speak into it at any point and the cat's helmet picked up the voice, carried it to the stalker. "Tell me, lad, what does it feel like?"

"I'm not quite sure, Kicker. I'm getting it mixed. It feels like the eyes staring. . .and wood. . .and sap . . .and yet there's mobility. It can't be the trees."

"You're sure."

"As best I can tell right now, Kicker. I'm going to go into the forest and see."

"Good luck, lad."

"Thank you, Driver. How is your goiter?"

"I'm fine, lad. Take care."

The stalker-cat padded carefully to the edge of the forest. Sunlight slanted through the feathertops into the gloom. It was cool and dim inside there.

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Now, all eyes were upon him.

The first paw in met springy, faintly moist and cool earth. The fallen feathers had turned to mulch. It smelled like cinnamon. Not overpoweringly so, just pleasantly so. He went in. . .all the way. The last the Filonii saw on their perimeter screens—twenty of the hundred—were his tails switching back and forth. Then the tails were gone and the seventy screens showed them dim, strangely-shadowed pathways between the giant conifers.

"Cat, lad, can you draw any conclusions from those trails?"

The stalker padded forward, paused. "Yes. I can draw the conclusion they aren't trails. They go fairly straight for a while, then come to dead ends at the bases of the trees. I'd say they were drag trails, if anything."

"What was dragged? Can you tell?"

"No, not really, Homer. Whatever was dragged, it was thick and fairly smooth. But that's all I can tell." He prodded the drag trail with his secondary leg on the left side. In the pad of the paw were tactile sensors.

The cat proceeded down the drag trail toward the base of the great tree where the trail unaccountably ended. All around him the great conifers rose six hundred feet into the warm, moist air.

Sipper, in the ship, saw through the cat's eyes and pointed out things to his fellows. "Some of the qualities of *Pseudotsuga Taxifolia*, but definitely a conifer. Notice the bark on that one. Typically *Eucalyptus Regnans*. . .yet notice the soft red spores covering the bark. I've never encountered that particular sort of thing before. They seem to be melting down the trees. In fact. . ."

He was about to say the trees were *all* covered with the red spores, when the red spores attacked the cat.

They flowed down the trees, covering the lower bark, each one the size of the cat's head, and when

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they touched, they ran together like jelly. When the red jelly from one tree reached the base of the trunk, it fused with the red jelly from the other trees.

"Lad. . ."

"It's all right, Kicker. I see them."

The cat began to pad backward: slowly, carefully. He could easily outrun the fusing crimson jelly. He moved back toward the verge of the clearing. Charred, empty of life, blasted by the Filonii hack-shafts, not even a stump of the great trees above ground, the great circles where the trees had stood now merely reflective surfaces set flush in the ground. Back.

Backing out of life. . .backing into death.

The cat paused. What had caused *that* thought?

"Cat! Those spores. . .whatever they are. . .they're forming into a solid. . ."

Backing out of life. . .backing into death.

my name is
bailey and i'm in
here, inside you.
i was stolen from
my body by a creature
called the succubus. he, *it*
is some kind of puppeteer, a sort of recruiter from out there in the stars
wants somewhere. he—

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The blood-red spore thing stood fifteen feet high, formless, shapeless, changing, malleable, coming for the cat. The stalker did not move: within him, a battle raged.

"Cat, lad! Return! Get back!"

Though the universe belonged to the Filonii, it was only at moments when the loss of a portion of that universe seemed imminent that they realized how important their tools of ownership had become.

Bailey fought for control of the cat's mind.

Centuries of conditioning fought back.

The spore thing reached the cat and dripped around him. The screens of the Filonii went blood-red, then went blank.

The thing that had come from the trees oozed back into the forest, shivered for a moment, then vanished, taking the cat with it.

THE cat focused an eye. Then another. In sequence he opened and focused each of his thirty eyes. The place where he lay came into full luster. He was underground. The shapeless walls of the place dripped with sap and several colors of viscous fluid. The fluid dripped down over bark that seemed to have been formed as stalactites, the grain running long and glistening till it tapered into needle tips. The surface on which the cat lay was planed wood, the grain exquisitely formed, running outward from a coral-colored pith in concentric circles of hues that went from coral to dark teak at the outer perimeter.

The spores had fissioned, were heaped in an alcove. Tunnels ran off in all directions. Huge tunnels twenty feet across.

The mesh cap was gone.

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The cat got to his feet. Bailey was there, inside, fully awake, conversing with the cat.

"Am I cut off from the Filonii?"

"Yes, I'm afraid you are."

"Under the trees."

"That's right."

"What is that spore thing?"

"I know, but I'm not sure you'd understand."

"I'm a stalker; I've spent my life analyzing alien life-forms and alien ecology. I'll understand."

"They're mobile symbiotes, conjoined with the bark of these trees. Singly, they resemble most closely anemonic anaerobic bacteria, susceptible to dichotomisation; they're anacusic, anabiotic, anamnestic, and feed almost exclusively on ancyclostomiasis."

"Hookworms?"

"Big hookworms. Very big hookworms."

"The drag trails?"

"That's what they drag."

"But none of that makes any sense. It's impossible."

"So is reincarnation among the Yerbans, but it occurs."

"I don't understand."

"I told you you wouldn't."

"How do *you* know all this?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Thank you. There's more about the spores and the trees, by the way. Perhaps the most important part."

"Which is?"

"Fused, they become a quasi-sentient gestalt. They can communicate, borrowing power from the tree-hosts."

"That's even *more* implausible!"

"Don't argue with me, argue with the Creator."

"First Cause."

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"Have it your way."

"What are you doing in my head?"

"Trying very hard to get out."

"And how would you do that?"

"Foul up your mission so the Filonii would demand the Succubus replace me. I gather you're pretty important to them. Rather chickenshit, aren't they?"

"I don't recognize the term."

"I'll put it in sense form."

£■ ■ ■ ■ ■]

"Oh. You mean ••¶-."

"Yeah. Chickenshit."

"Well, that's the way it's always been between the Filonii and the stalkers."

"You like it that way."

"I like my fish."

"Your Filonii like to play God, don't they? Changing this world and that world to suit themselves. Reminds me of a couple of other guys. Lords of Propriety they were called. And the Succubus. Did you ever stop to think how many individuals and races like to play God?"

"Right now I'd like to get out of here."

"Easy enough."

"How?"

"Make friends with the Tszechmae."

"The trees or the spores?"

"Both."

"One name for the symbiotic relationship?"

"They live in harmony."

"Except for the hookworms."

"No society is perfect. Rule 19."

The cat sat back on his haunches, and talked to himself.

"Make friends with them you say."

"Seems like a good idea, doesn't it?"

"How would you suggest I do that?"

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"Offer to perform a service for them. Something they can't do for themselves."

"Such as?"

"How about you'll get rid of the Filonii for them. Right now that's the thing most oppressing them."

"Get rid of the Filonii."

"Yes."

"I'm harboring a lunatic in my head."

"Well, if you're going to quit before you start. . ."

"Precisely *how*—uh, do you have a name?"

"I told you. Bailey."

"Oh, Yes. Sorry. Well, Bailey, precisely *how* do I rid this planet of a star-spanning vessel weighing somewhere just over thirteen thousand tons, not to mention a full complement of officers and ecologists who have been in the overlord position with my race for more centuries than I can name? I'm conditioned to respect them."

"You sure don't sound as if you respect them."

The cat paused. That was true. He felt quite different. He disliked the Filonii intensely. Hated them, in fact; as his kind had hated them for more centuries than he could name.

"That *is* peculiar. Do you have any explanation for it?"

"Well," said Bailey, humbly, "there *is* my presence. It may well have broken through all your hereditary conditioning."

"You wear smugness badly."

"Sorry."

The cat continued to think on the possibilities.

"I wouldn't take too much longer, if I were you," Bailey urged him. Then, reconsidering, he added, "As a matter of fact, I *am* you."

"You're trying to tell me something."

"I'm trying to tell you that the gestalt spore grabbed you, to get a line on what was happening with the invaders, but you've been sitting here for

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some time, musing to yourself—which, being instantaneously communicative throughout the many parts of the whole, is a concept they can't grasp—and so it's getting ready to digest you."

The stalker blinked his thirty eyes very rapidly. "The spore thing?"

"Uh-uh. All the spores eat are the hookworms. The bark's starting to look at you with considerable interest."

"Who do I talk to? Quick!"

"You've decided you don't respect the Filonii so much, huh?"

"I thought you said I should hurry!"

"Just curious."

"*Who do I talk to!?!*"

"The floor."

So the stalker-cat talked to the floor, and they struck a bargain. Rather a lopsided bargain, true; but a bargain nonetheless.

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7

THE hookworm was coming through the tunnel much more rapidly than the cat would have expected. It seemed to be sliding, but even as he watched, it bunched—inchworm-like—and propelled itself forward, following the movement with another slide. The wooden tunnel walls oozed with a noxious smelling moistness as the worm passed. It was moving itself on a slime track of its own secretions.

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It was eight feet across, segmented, a filthy gray in color, and what passed for a face was merely a slash-mouth dripping yellowish mucus, several hundred cilia-like feelers surrounding the slit, and four glaze-covered protruberances in an uneven row above the slit perhaps serving in some inadequate way as "eyes."

Like a strange Hansel dropping bread crumbs to mark a trail, the spore things clinging to the cat's back began to ooze off. First one, then another. The cat backed down the tunnel. The hookworm came on. It dropped its fleshy penis-like head and snuffled at the spore lying in its path. Then the cilia feelers attached themselves and the spore thing was slipped easily into the slash mouth. There was a disgusting wet sound, and the hookworm moved forward again. The same procedure was repeated at the next spore. And the next, and the next. The hookworm followed the stalker through the tunnels.

Some miles away, the Filonii stared into their screen as a strange procession of red spores formed in the shape of a long thick hawser-like chain emerged from the forest and began to encircle the ship.

"Repulsors?" Kicker asked.

"Not yet, they haven't made a hostile move," the Homer said. "The cat could have won them somehow. This may be a welcoming ceremony. Let's wait and see."

The ship was completely circled, at a distance of fifty feet from the vessel. The Filonii waited, having faith in their cat lad.

And far underground, the stalker-cat led the hookworm a twisting chase through tunnel after tunnel. Some of the tunnels were formed only moments before the cat and his pursuer entered them. The tunnels always sloped gently upward. The cat—dropping his spore riders as he went—led the enormous slug-thing by a narrow margin. But enough to keep him coming.

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Then, into a final tunnel, and the cat leaped to a planed outcropping overhead, then to a tiny hole in the tunnel ceiling, and then out of sight.

The Filonii shouted with delight as the stalker emerged from a hole in the blasted earth, just beyond the circle of red spores, linked and waiting.

"You see! Good cat!" Driver yelled to his fellows.

But the cat made no move toward the ship.

"He's waiting for the welcoming ceremony to end," the Homer said with assurance.

Then, on their screens, they saw first one red spore, then another, vanish, as though sucked down through the ground from below.

They vanished in sequence, and the Filonii followed their disappearance around the screens, watching them go in a 90° arc, then 180° of half-circle, then 250° and the ground began to tremble.

And before the hookworm could suck his dinner down through a full 360° of the circle, the ground gave way beneath the thirteen thousand tons of Filonii starship, and the vessel thundered through, down into special tunnels dug straight down. Plunged down with the plates of the ship separating and cracking open. Plunged down with the hookworm that would soon discover sweeter morsels than even red spore things.

The Filonii tried to save themselves.

There was very little they could do. Driver cursed the cat and made a final contact with the Succubus. It was an automatic hookup, much easier to throw in than to fire the ship for takeoff. Particularly a quarter of a mile underground.

The hookworm broke through the ship. The Tszechmae waited. When the hookworm had gorged itself, they would move in and slay the creature.

Then *they* would feast.

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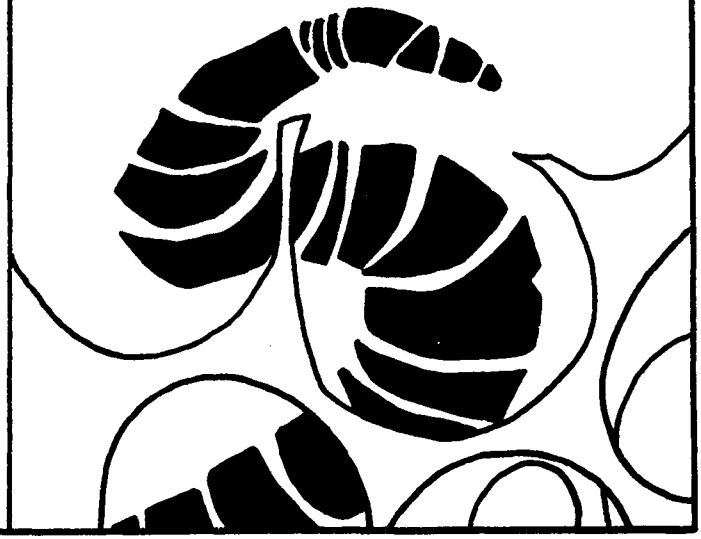
But Bailey would not be around to see the great meal. For only moments after the Filonii ship plunged crashing out of sight, he felt a ghastly wrenching at his soulself, and the stalker-cat was left empty once more—thereby proving in lopsided bargains no one is the winner but the house—and the soul of William Bailey went streaking out away from Belial toward the unknown.

Deep in wooden tunnels, things began to feed.



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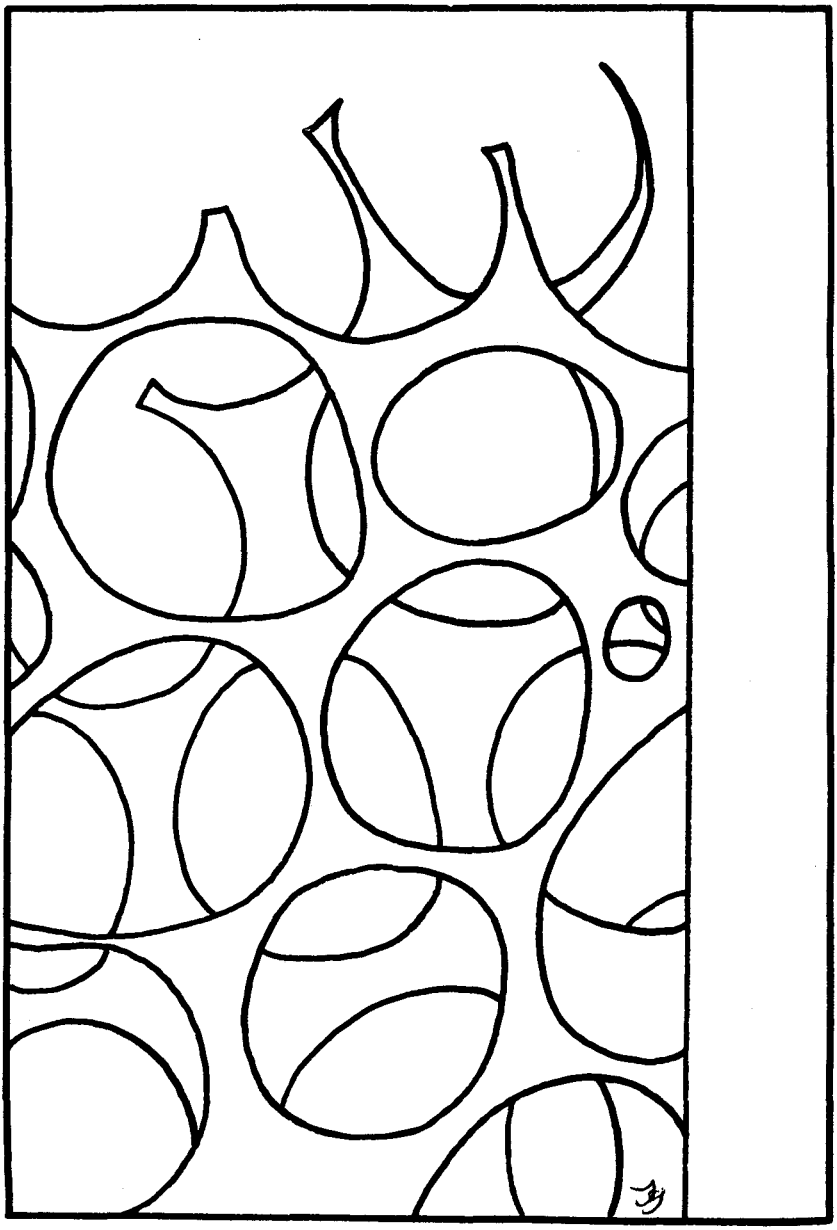

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8

THE darkness was the deepest blue. Not black. It was blue. He could see nothing. Not even himself. He could not tell what the body into which he had been cast did, or had, or resembled, or did not do, have or not resemble. He reached out into the blue darkness. He touched nothing.

But then, perhaps he had not reached out. He had felt himself extend *something* into the blueness, but how far, or in what direction, or if it had been an appendage. . .he did not know.

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He tried to touch himself, and did not know where to touch. He reached for his face, where a Bailey face would have been. He touched nothing.

He tried to touch his chest. He met resistance, and then penetrated something soft. He could not distinguish if he had pushed through fur or skin or hide or jelly or moisture or fabric or metal or vegetable matter or foam or some heavy gas. He had no feeling in either his "hand" or his "chest" but there was *something* there.

He tried to move, and moved. But he did not know if he was rolling or hopping or walking or sliding or flying or propelling or being propelled. But he moved. And he reached down with the thing he had used to touch himself, and felt nothing below him. He did not have legs. He did not have arms. Blue. It was so blue.

He moved as far as he could move in one direction, and there was nothing to stop him. He could have moved in that direction forever, and met no resistance. So he moved in another direction—opposite, as far as he could tell, and as far as he could go. But there was no boundary. He went up and went down and went around in circles. There was nothing. Endless nothing.

Yet he knew he was *in* somewhere. He was not in the emptiness of space, he was in an enclosed space. But what dimensions the place had, he could not tell. And what he was, he could not tell.

It made him upset. He had not been upset in the body of Pinkh, nor in the body of the stalker-cat. But this life he now owned made him nervous.

Why should that be?

Something was coming for him.

He knew that much.

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He was here	and	something else was out there, coming toward him.

He knew fear. Blue fear. Deep unseeing blue fear. If it was coming fast, it would be here sooner. If slow, then later. But it was coming. He could feel, sense, intuit it coming for him. He wanted to change. To become something else.

To become *this*
Or to become THIS
Or to become *THIS*
Or to become tHiS

But to become *something* else, something that could withstand what was coming for him. He didn't know what that could be. All he knew was that he needed equipment. He ran through his bailey-thoughts, his baileymind, to sort out what he might need.

What he needed might be	Fangs Poisonous breath Eyes Horns Malleability Webbed feet Armored hide Talons Camouflage Wings Carapaces Muscles Vocal cords Scales Self-regeneration Stingers Wheels Multiple brains
What he already had	Nothing

It was coming closer. Or was it getting farther away? (And by getting farther away, becoming more of a threat to him?) (If he went toward it, would he be safer?) (If only he could know what he looked like, or where he was, or what was required of him?) (Orient!) (Damn it, orient yourself, Bailey!) He was deep in blueness, extended, foetal, waiting. Shapeless. (Shape—) (Could *that* be it?)

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Something blue flickered in the blueness.

It was coming end-for-end, flickering and sparking and growing larger, swimming toward him in the blueness. It sent tremors through him. Fear gripped him as it had never gripped him before. The blue shape coming toward him was the most fearful thing he could remember: and he remembered:

The night he had found Moravia with another man. They were standing having sex in a closet at a party. Her dress was bunched up around her waist; he had her up on tip-toes. She was crying with deep pleasure, eyes closed.

The day at the end of the war, when a laser had sliced off the top of the head of the man on his left in the warm metal trench. The sight of things still pulsing in the jasmine jelly.

The moment he had come to the final knowledge of his hopeless future. The moment he had decided to go to the Center to find death.

The thing changed shape and sent out scintillant waves of blueness and fear. He writhed away from them but they swept over him, and he turned over and over trying to escape. The thing of blue came nearer, growing larger in his sight. (Sight? Writhing? Fear?) It suddenly swept toward him, faster than before, as though it had tried a primary assault—the waves of fear—and the assault had failed; and now it would bull through.

He felt an urge to leap, high. He felt himself do it, and suddenly his sight went up and his propulsive equipment went lower, and he was longer, taller, larger. He fled. Down through the blueness, with the corcuscating blue devil following. It elongated itself and shot past him on one side, boiled on ahead till it was a mere pinpoint of incandescence on some heightless, dimensionless horizon. And then it came racing back toward him, thinning itself and stretching itself till it was opaque, till the blueness of where they were shone through it darkly, like effulgent isinglass in a blue hyperplane.

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He trembled in fear and went minute. He balled and shrank and contracted and drew himself to a finite point, and the whirling danger went hurtling through him and beyond, and was lost back the way they had come.

Inside the body he now owned, Bailey felt something wrenching and tearing. Fibers pulled loose from moorings and he was certain his mind was giving way. He had memories of sense-deprivation chambers and what had happened to men who had been left in them too long. This was the same. No shape, no size, no idea or way of gaining an idea of what he was, or where he was, or the touch, smell, sound, sight of *anything* as an anchor to his sanity. Yet he was surviving.

The dark blue devil kept arranging new assaults —and he had no doubt it would be back in seconds (seconds?) —and he kept doing the correct thing to escape those assaults. But he had the feeling (feeling?) that at some point the instinctive reactions of this new body would be insufficient. That he would have to bring to this new role his essential baileyness, his human mind, his thoughts, the cunning he had begun to understand was so much a part of his way. (And why had he not understood that cunningness when he had been Bailey, all the years of his hopeless life?)

The effulgence began again somewhere off to his side and high above him, coming on rapidly.

Bailey, some *thing* unknown, prepared. As best he could.

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you may be sure i paid dearly to do so, my dear yaquil. the succubus, yaquil. it cost me five tenils of life. chide me all you wish . . . unlike you, i do not look on—but you do. you have *always* thought of it as a game. while you were born herdur. there *was* a time when it—and we remain. you cannot fluster me with platitudes! i can say it because we have waged this combat too long. but for an althus it is. call an end, yaquil! do it now. submission is no part of it. i merely say stop quickly. no, because the tenils pass and the heat goes and we die! yes, die! and i've used more frames than i can afford. better now than too late. you over-extend yourself, sir. impudence, impertinence . . . how you ever became a combatant—you leave me no alternative. frames be damned, we fight! and concede a defeat i need not have conceded? fight on. i offered you an opportunity. the time for talk is done!

MARVELOUS, ANIK! HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO REVITALIZE IT? OH, I'M SURE YOU DID. BUT *HOW* DID YOU MANAGE? PLEASE! FIVE!! YOU REALLY *DO* WANT TO WIN, DON'T YOU? TSK-TSK. I KNOW. YOU DON'T LOOK ON THIS AS A GAME. NOR SHOULD I. AND THAT'S SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU WERE BORN ALTHUS, WHILE—WHEN IT MEANT SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT? YES, BUT TIME GOES. FLUSTER YOU? MY DEAR GOOD ANIK, HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT? TEN THOUSAND TENILS ISN'T TOO LONG. NOT FOR A HERDUR. ARE YOU PLEADING FOR SURCEASE, MY FRIEND? DO YOU SUBMIT? WHY? BECAUSE YOUR CHAMPION IS A FALSE SOUL IN ITS BODY? TRULY, ANIK, YOU MUST THINK ME A CULLY OR A FOOL! DIE! THEN GO TO RESERVE FRAMES. I CAN'T CONCERN MYSELF NOW. LET *ME* WORRY ABOUT THE EXTENT OF MY OVER-EXTENSIONS! YOU'LL WORRY ABOUT THAT TILL THE MOMENT I DESTROY YOU. IT WAS *INTENDED* THAT WE FIGHT. IF YOU WANT OUT, I SAY GO! YOUR SUBSTITUTE CHAMPION HAS NO CHANCE, I SWEAR IT, ANIK!

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The blue devil swept down on him, crackling with energy. He felt the incredible million sting-points of pain and a sapping of strength. Then a

for it had. Now Bailey knew what

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he was, and what he had to do. He lay still, swimming in the never-ending forever blueness. He was soft and he was solitary. The blue devil swarmed and came on. For the last time. And when it was all around him, Bailey let it drink him. He left its deep blueness and its fear and its sparkling effulgence sweep over him, consume him. The blue devil gorged itself, grew larger, fuller, more incapable of movement, unable to free itself. Bailey stuffed it with his amoebic body. He split and formed yet another, and the blue devil extended itself and began feeding on his second self. The radiating sparking waves of fear and blueness were thicker now, coming more slowly. Binary fission again. Now there were four. The blue devil fed, consumed, filled its chambers and its source-buds. Again, fission. And now there were eight. And the blue devil began to lose color. Bailey did not divide again. He knew what he had to do. Neither he, nor the blue devil could win this combat. Both must die. The feeding went on and on, and finally the blue devil had drained itself with fullness, made itself immobile, died. And he died. And there was emptiness in the blueness once more.

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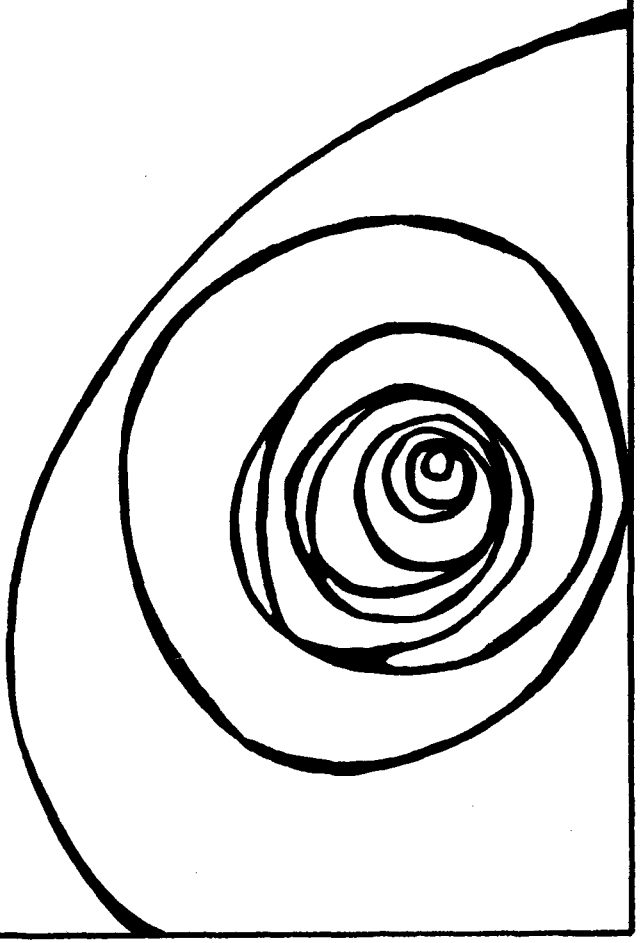
The frames, the tenils, the fullness of combat were ended. And in that last fleeting instant of sentience, Bailey imagined he heard scented wails of hopelessness from two Duelmasters somewhere out there. He gloated. Now they knew what it was to be a William Bailey, to be hopeless and alone and afraid.

He gloated for an instant, then was whirled out and away.



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9

THIS time his repose lasted only a short time. It was rush season for the Succubus. Bailey went out to fill the husk of a Master Slavemaster whose pens were filled with females of the eighty-three races that peopled the Snowdrift Cluster asteroids. Bailey succeeded in convincing the Slavemaster that male chauvenism was detestable, and the females were bound into a secret organization that returned to their various rock-worlds, overthrew the all-male governments and declared themselves the Independent Feminist Concourse.

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He was pulled back and sent out to inhabit the radio wave "body" of a needler creature used by the Kirk to turn suns nova and thereby provide them with power sources. Bailey gained possession of the needler and imploded the Kirk home sun.

He was pulled back and sent out to inhabit the shell of a ten thousand year old terrapin whose retention of random construction information made it invaluable as the overseer of a planetary reorganization project sponsored by a pale gray race without a name that altered solar systems just beyond the Finger Fringe deepout. Bailey let the turtle feed incorrect data to the world-swingers hauling the planets into their orbits, and the entire configuration collided in the orbit of the system's largest heavy-mass world. The resultant uprising caused the total eradication of the pale gray race.

He was pulled back . . .

Finally, even a creature as vast and involved as the Succubus, a creature plagued by a million problems and matters for attention, in effect a god-of-a-sort, was forced to take notice. There was a soul in his file that was causing a fullness leak. There was a soul that was anathema to what the Succubus had built his reputation on. There was a soul that seemed to be (unthinkable as it was) out to get him. There was a soul that was ruining things. There was a soul that was inept. There was a soul that was (again, unthinkably) consciously trying to ruin the work the Succubus had spent his life setting in motion. There was a soul named Bailey.

And the Succubus consigned him to soul limbo till he could clear away present obligations and draw him under the lens for scrutiny.

So Bailey was sent to limbo.

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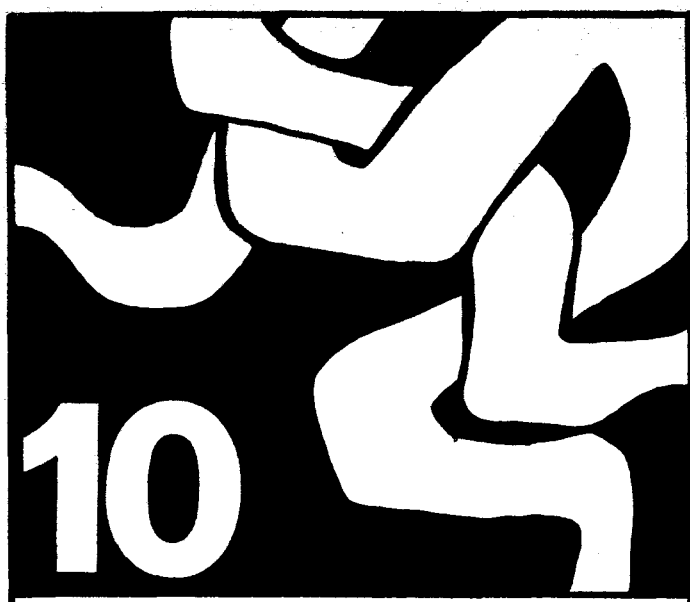

THIS is what it was like in soul limbo.

Soft pasty maggoty white. Roiling. Filled with sounds of things desperately trying to see. Slippery underfoot. Without feet. Breathless and struggling for breath. Enclosed. Tight, with great weight pressing down till the pressure was asphyxiating. But without the ability to breathe. Pressed brown to cork, porous and feeling imminent crumbling; then broiling liquid poured through. Pain in every filament and glass fiber. A wet thing settling into bones, turning them to ash and paste. Sickly sweetness, thick and rancid, tongued and swallowed and bloating. Bloating till bursting. A charnal scent. Rising smoke burning and burning the sensitive tissues. Love lost forever, the pain of knowing nothing could ever matter again; melancholia so possessive it wrenched deep inside and twisted organs that never had a chance to function.

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Cold tile.

Black crepe paper.

Fingernails scraping slate.

Button pains.

Tiny cuts at sensitive places.

Weakness.

Hammering steadily pain.

That was what it was like in the Succubus's soul limbo. It was not punishment, it was merely the dead end. It was the place where the continuum had not been completed. It was not Hell, for Hell had form and substance and purpose. This was a crater, a void, a storeroom packed with uselessness. It was the place to be sent when pastpresentfuture were one and indeterminate. It was altogether ghastly.

Had Bailey gone mad, this would have been the place for it to happen. But he did not. There was a reason.

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ONE hundred thousand eternities later, the Succubus cleared his desk of present work, filled all orders and answered all current correspondence, finished inventory and took a long-needed vacation. When he returned, before turning his attention to new business, he brought the soul of William Bailey out of limbo and ushered it under the lens.

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And found it, somehow, *different*.

Quite unlike the millions and millions of other souls he had stolen.

He could not put a name to the difference. It was not a force, not a vapor, not a quality, not a potentiality, not a look, not a sense, not a capacity, not anything he could pinpoint. And, of course, such a *difference* might be invaluable.

So the Succubus drew a husk from the spare parts and rolling stock bank, and put Bailey's soul into it.

It must be understood that this was a consumately E M P T Y husk. Nothing lived there. It had been scoured clean. It was not like the many bodies into which Bailey had been inserted. Those had had their souls stolen. There was restraining potential in all of them, memories of persona, fetters invisible but present nonetheless. This husk was now Bailey. Bailey only, Bailey free and Bailey whole.

The Succubus summoned Bailey before him.

Bailey might have been able to describe the Succubus, but he had no such desire.

The examination began. The Succubus used light and darkness, lines and spheres, soft and hard, seasons of change, waters of Nepenthe, a hand outstretched, the whisper of a memory, carthing, enumeration, suspension, incursion, requital and thirteen others.

He worked over and WHAT through and inside the soul HE DID NOT of Bailey in an attempt to KNOW isolate the wild and dangerous WAS THAT difference that made this soul WHILE HE WAS unlike all others he EXAMINING had ever stolen for his tables of fulfillment BAILEY, BAILEY for the many races WAS that called upon EXAMINING him HIM.

Then, when he had all the knowledge he needed, all the secret places, all the unspoken promises, all the wished and fleshed depressions, the power that

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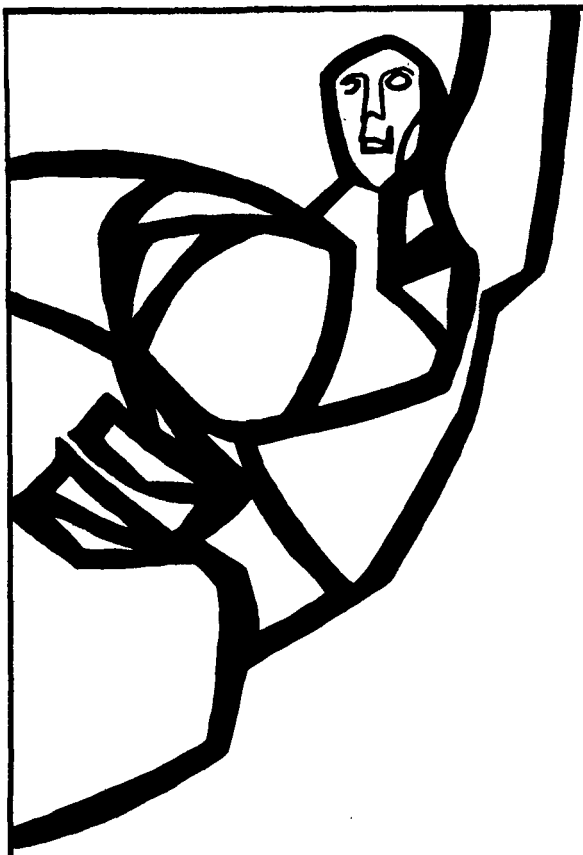

lurked in Bailey . . . that had *always* lurked in Bailey . . . before either of them could try or hope to contain it . . . surged free.

(It had been there all along.)

(Since the dawn of time, it had been there.)

(It had always existed.)

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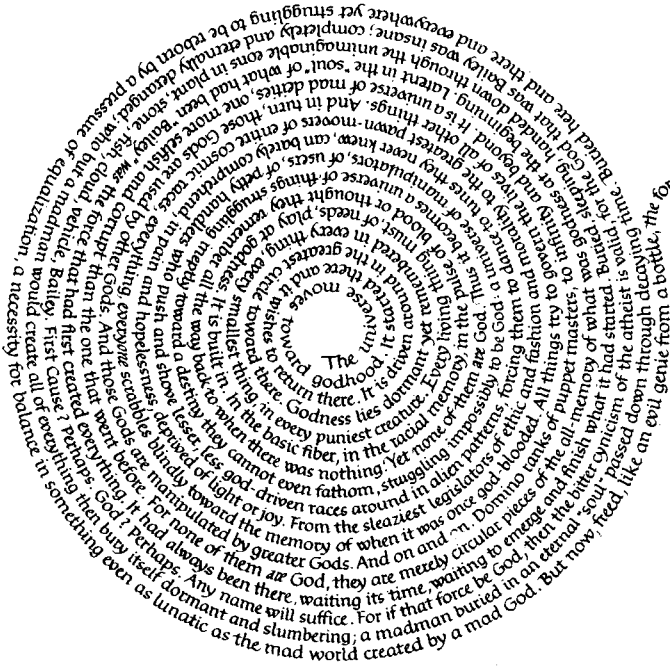
The universe moves
toward godhood. It is
created there and
around in the greatest cycle
of thing thing thing
thing thing thing
thing thing thing

blossomed to fullness, rejuvenated by its slumber, stronger than it had been even when it had created the universe. And, freed, it set about finishing what had begun millennia before.

Bailey remembered the Euthanasia Center, where it had begun for him. Remembered dying. Remembered being reborn. Remembered the life of inadequacy, impotency, hopelessness he had led before he'd given himself up to the Suicide Center. Remembered living as a one-eyed bear creature in a war that would never end. Remembered being a stalker-cat and death of a ghastliness it could not be spoken of. Remembered blueness. Remembered all the other lives. And remembered all the gods that had been less God than himself Bailey. The Lords of Propriety. The Filonii. The Montagasques. The Thils. The Tszechmae. The Duelmasters. The hookworms. The Slavemaster. The Kirk. The pale gray race without a name. And most of all, he remembered the Succubus.

Who thought he was God. Even as the Thieves thought *they* were Gods. But none of them possessed more than the faintest scintilla of the all-memory of godness, and Bailey had become the final repository for the force that *was* God. And now, freed, unleashed, unlocked, swirled down through all of time to this judgment day, Bailey flexed his godness and finished what he had begun at the beginning.

There is only one end to creation. What is created is destroyed, and thus full circle is achieved.

Bailey, God, set about killing the sand castle he had built. The destruction of the universes he had created.

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Never before.
Songs unsung.
Washed but never purified.
Dreams spent and visits to come.
Up out of slime.
Drifted down on cool trusting winds.
Heat.
Free.
All created, all equal, all wondering, all vastness.
Gone to night.

The power that was Bailey that was God began its efforts. The husk in which Bailey lived was drawn into the power. The Succubus, screaming for reprieve, screaming for reason, screaming for release or explanation, was drawn into the power. The soul station drawn in. The home world drawn in. The solar system of the home world drawn in. The galaxy and all the galaxies and the metagalaxies and the far island universes and the alter dimensions and the past back to the beginning and beyond it to the circular place where it became now, and all the shadow places and all the thought recesses and then the very fabric and substance of eternity . . . all of it, everything . . . drawn in.

All of it contained within the power of Bailey who is God.

And then, in one awesome exertion of will, God-Bailey destroys it all, coming full circle, ending what it had been born to do. Gone.

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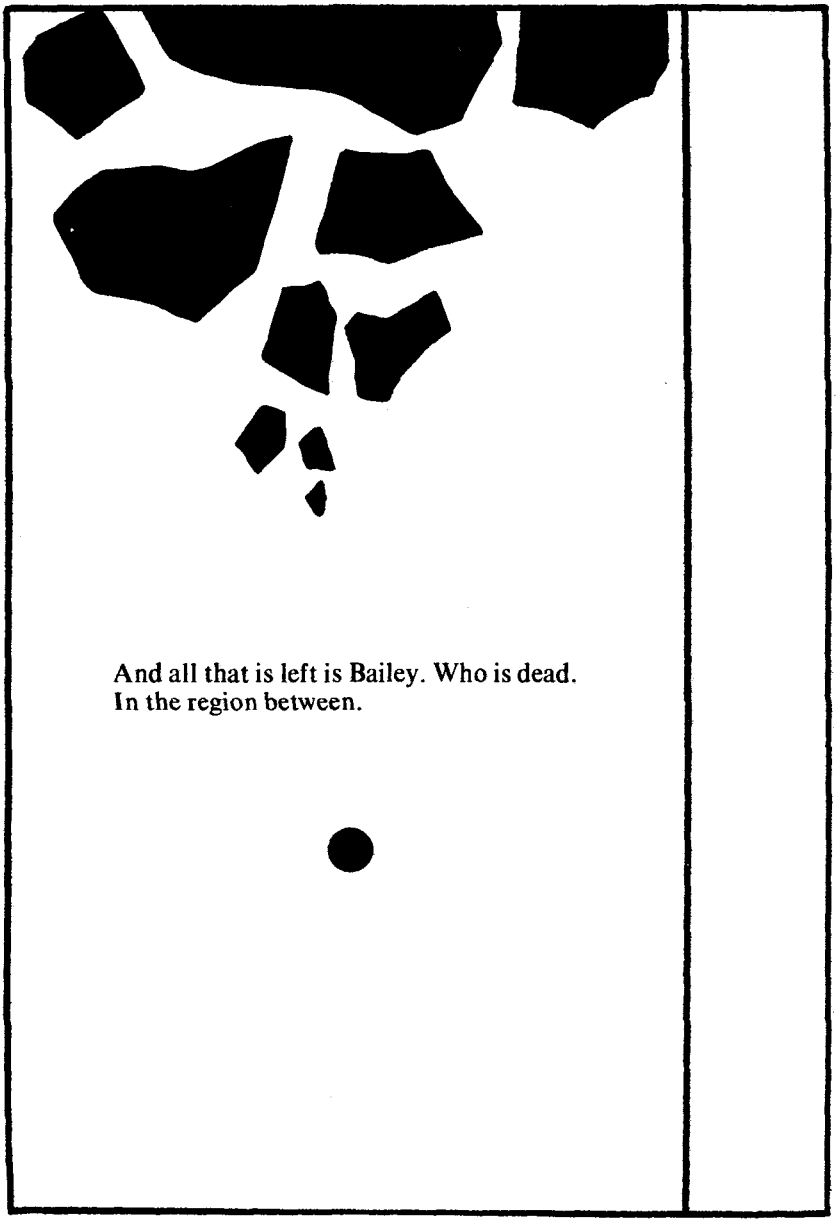

And all that is left is Bailey. Who is dead.
In the region between.

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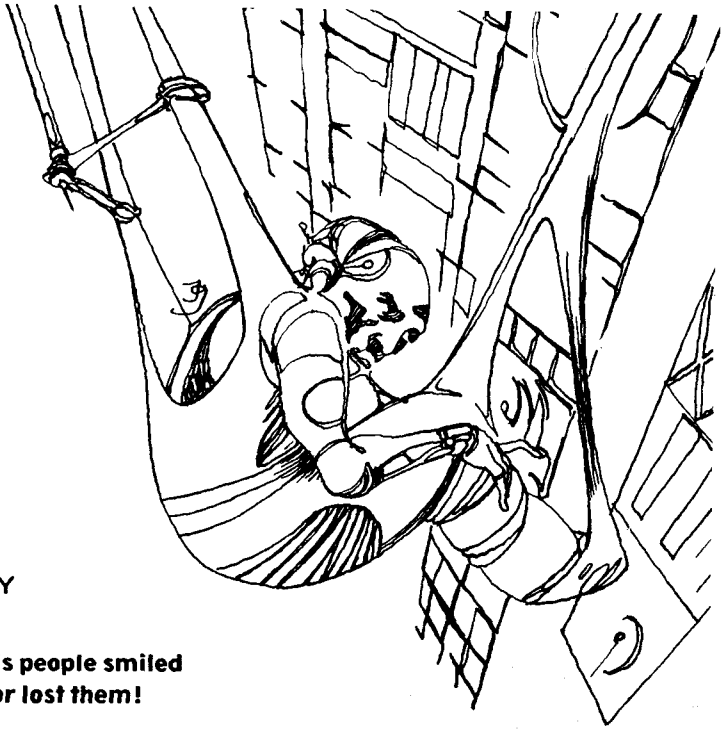

LEO P. KELLEY

The Propheteer's people smiled for their lives—or lost them!

THE PROPHETEER

SOME said he was more than two hundred years old. Some said he was less than a hundred. Some insisted he was at least a thousand. All were wrong.

His name was Evan Barrister and he was one hundred and thirteen years old. He no longer had eyes. Instead, in the deep sockets of his skull, lenses ground to micromillimeter perfection had been implanted. They recorded light and shadow and the subtlest movement so that he could still see clearly. His ears had gone—when? It had been years ago, he recalled. Everything seemed to have happened years ago. 2009? Yes, 2009. But the transistorized receptors that had replaced his auditory organs were better than any old ears. His laughter erupted in the huge room called Square Central but there was only himself to

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hear it. He sometimes wished he could die. Yet, paradoxically, he still wanted to live because forces of which he was wary were at large in the world. They expressed themselves not in shadow but openly in the smiles of men. And women.

Smiles he had placed there.

But he was weary.

People called him The Propheteer.

His fingers flicked expertly across the huge console of the Betty. He called the computer complex Betty because—well, the past, some of it—was worth remembering. His Betty of the long nights and glorious days had once been and would never be again. They had married in 'seventy-one. She had died in 'ninety-nine. He caught himself. In the bad old days they had called it wool-gathering. Today they had fancier and more frightful terms for what he had been doing. One of them was *regressing*.

The message from the console registered on his lenses.

1111111 = ++ X3 Oth LJ° 1/9 Nth.

The sixth finger that he had long ago had grafted onto his right hand for the extra facility it gave him lingered over the Oth. With his left hand he reached up and touched the button. He watched the reel of tape spin, stop, click, spin again.

No, it was all right.The citizen's adrenalin flow was at a safe level. The Oth had been merely another early warning signal. He pressed a bar labeled Automatic Recall and set the timer at ten-minute intervals. Betty spoke to him in her many mysterious voices and he let himself listen and remember.

I don't see why you have to give your whole life to society, Evan. It isn't fair to either of us. I mean, you and I—well, we never have any time together any more. Here, give me your hand. Oh! Evan, what—

The sixth finger had been what. It had frightened Betty. It made him somebody *other*, she had said. *Betty, Betty!* So had all the lost years without rest or enough time for tinkering with the ancient clocks he had loved so much. Cuckoos there had been. And one with a bear that popped out on a little platform every hour on the hour to play an accordion he held in his paws as he pranced and danced and the hours struck.

He spun the sling in which he sat and whirled like a shrunken bird about the many faces of Betty as he checked and rechecked all the levers and dials and buttons and little flashing lights that were in perfect operating order and he pretended that he did not know this essentially demeaning fact.

OUTSIDE the steel doors of Square Central, Scott stood

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looking at his face reflected in the gloss of the metal.

I look like some strange fish in an even stranger sea. I must go in. I must tell him . . .

A gaudy vision of blood and sand arose in his mind and he was standing above his fallen opponent, sword raised high, listening to the hush of the spectators at the gladiatorial contest and yearning for the roar of love that would come and wash over him when he brought the sword down in obedience to the edict of the earthward-pointing thumbs of the crowd.

I will tell him . . .

Scott stepped forward and the steel surrendered before him. Through the open door he went and he heard it sigh shut behind him.

Evan was up there on the eleventh tier in his sling, equipped with nutrient needles and a hidden waste disposal unit.

"Evan," Scott said and it was almost a shout in the softly whirring room.

"Scott, hello there, boy. I'm just about finished checking the Sector Receptors. Hold on."

When the sling descended and Evan sat facing him, Scott said, "Everything okay?"

"Turned up a man with a vacillating adrenalin flow. I'm keeping an eye on him. It may be nothing to worry about. How's my assistant savior of the world from crime and its perpetrators?"

"I'm fine, Evan. I came to—"

To what? To bring down the sword one final fatal time? To tell the truth and spin an old man's world out of orbit?

"What is it, Scott? Trouble out there?"

He couldn't do it. "No, none. There hasn't been a crime committed here on Earth or on any of the subsidiary worlds or in the spacelanes since—"

"Nineteen-ninety-two. June Tenth. Oh-one-hundred-hours.

"Right."

"Then what are you looking so sulky for? Don't tell me. That girl, that what's-her-name. The one that dusts her eyelids with crystals. She giving you trouble?"

"No, Evan," Scott answered, smiling. "It's not Lenore. Although she does give a guy trouble sometimes."

"Every beautiful woman does. They just can't seem to help it. It's an occupational hazard—part of being a woman and beautiful. Is it Darby then?"

"Darby? Darby's okay, I guess. He's planning on revamping the Allied Arts Program. But I guess you know about that."

Evan studied the young man who stood before him, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. There was one thing about lenses. They had ordinary eyes beat in spades when it came to picking up nuances. They could peg a frown or the narrowing of lips in anger

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better than just plain cellular eyes. Lenses were to eyes what a Leica was to a Brownie. Scott, Evan noticed, had tensed the muscles in his cheeks and his smile wasn't quite working. The reason had to be Darby. It was always Darby.

"Why the need for reprograming?" Evan asked.

Scott cleared his throat. "Darby says there are evidences of criminal intent apparent in the design of some of the newer art forms. You've seen Riker's variations on the Corinthian columns for New Arena?"

Evan shook his head.

"They're corrupting, Darby claims, because of their post-Dionysian connotations. They're fertility symbols, he says, with a potential corruptibility quotient of —oh, I forget exactly. Anyway—"

"Anyway, he wants to make it a crime to design pillars with doodads on them because he thinks they might give pubescent little girls naughty ideas. Damn Darby. I wish he'd let well enough alone."

"He's a good Propheteer's Man, though," Evan concluded somewhat reluctantly. "Dedicated."

"Yes, he is," Scott admitted. "But—well, sometimes he strikes me as too dedicated. Driven might be a better word."

Evan caught the look in Scott's eyes. "He's part of the system, Scott, and so am I. So are you. We all approve of it—the system. As for myself, why shouldn't I?

Ballantine Books

MORE AND MORE, every day, our planet gets a little bit smaller. Being as fascinated by conservation as we are, not because we are bugs about nature (no pun intended) but because it's a matter of survival, we were interested in a recent study which came up with the delightful concept that if we continue to throw as many tons of pollutants into the atmosphere as we are presently doing, in twenty years the planet will be shrouded permanently in a smog haze. **Certain pollutants do not go away**. They just hang up there, a circling blanket and several miles thick. Goodbye sun.

•

WITH which gay thought for February, which has always been a lousy month for us horoscopically speaking, we can proceed with the books you should be buying in large quantities to give away. THE POPULATION BOMB, MOMENT IN THE SUN, THE FRAIL OCEAN, PERILS OF THE PEACEFUL ATOM and our anti-SST book, probable title THE SONIC BOMB (by Wm. Shurcliff). Show Pope Nixon where it's at.

•

FOR TOTAL joy books in February, we have James Branch Cabell's THE HIGH PLACE—a magnificent story printed from the Storisende text,

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with as many of Frank C. Pape's delicious drawings as we could get anywhere near reproducing decently. We even managed to adapt one of his drawings for the cover. Absolutely one of the best. This month we introduce a new writer to the fans, Martha deMey Clow. Not only a new face in science fiction, but a first novel to boot. STARBREED is the title—its strengths lie in demonstrating how vulnerable the human race is—patsies for a handful of neo-men with just a little bit of an edge. If you think it couldn't happen, remember back to a certain housepainter who started with only his paranoia to assist him.

•

PHOENIX, on the other hand, our second book from Richard Cowper, gives one pause for hope. A several-century pause but still it's nice to feel the species isn't doomed, even if the survivors have to be a pretty tough breed to make it.

February being the start of a New Year (for publishers) perhaps we should give you a swift recap of highlights from 1969—so you won't forget to order before it's too late: headed of course by STAND ON ZANZIBAR and our own favorite Pope's joyous spoof, UP THE LINE. Plus plus plus:

Hell, we ran out of space—all right, next month we'll list all the other pretties. BB

After all, I created it. Well, no, that's not true exactly. All I really did was analyze the emerging patterns of criminal behavior I found in the old police precinct station records and nurse them along to their proper conclusion. Once the police had begun to notice that certain crimes occurred with almost predictable frequency in certain areas at certain times, I merely had to apply the laws of statistical probability in terms of the citizen profiles I developed and the rest, as they say, is history. As you said, no crime has been committed on Earth or any of the off-worlds in years. Which proves that the system works. Nowadays we nip crime in the bud, so to speak." Evan waved a thin hand about the vastness of Square Central. "All this," he said, almost reverently, "keeps us safe. And I keep it safe. Now that we've got every citizen's physiological and psychological data fed into Betty—" He stopped, embarrassed.

Scott pretended he hadn't heard the slip. "We can predict crime with absolute precision. We can tell who will commit a crime and when. We can even predict the exact nature of the crime."

"Adrenalin flow, electrical discharges from the brain, chemical constituency of the blood, frustration threshold—all of it," Evan was saying, gazing about Square Central as if he were seeing it for the first time. "We've run tests to

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identify each citizen in terms I've defined. We've established individual norms. Then we spit it all into the—the computer here. Now we wait and watch. For variations that warn of uncontrollable rage. For signs of fear. The whole gamut of emotions that are the harbingers of violent and desperate acts. Then we send out the Propheteer's Men before the crime is committed, apprehend the potential offender and we therapeutize him for however long is necessary. And then we release him—cured."

Tell him!

"It works, Scott," Evan continued. "All I did was extrapolate a bit from the old precinct station statistics, utilize and improve upon our already existing emotional indices analyses and adapt both linear and nonlinear programing to accommodate them and—"

He smiled and winked at Scott.

"And Betty was born," Scott said, smiling back.

Evan nodded, almost shyly. "And the P-Men do the rest. The policemen."

"The Propheteer's Men."

"The Propheteer's Men," Evan repeated. "Slang terms make me queasy. Policemen, Propheteer's Men. It doesn't matter what you call them as long as they do the job. And jails, Scott! Think about jails! You've gone through Trap Training. You know what jails were like. Cesspools. Crime factories. In the twentieth century they put people in cages and kept them there, Scott!" Evan's voice was rising and the sling in which he sat shuddered with his growing agitation. "The ones they didn't keep in cages, Scott, they killed. Killed! Just think about that one for a minute. But no more. Now we cure. Funny. There used to be a saying. 'Kill or cure.' Shows we've come a little way at least, wouldn't you say, considering that we don't kill anymore."

"Thanks to science," Evan said. "If we can skip here and there among the stars, we certainly ought to be able to deal with a guy who's so sick scared he feels he's got to kill the guy next door for whatever crazy reason. Or the thief who just takes what he wants, whether it's an old woman's pocketbook or the plans for the latest rocket launcher. Both of them are off the right societal track. We just put them back on."

"Things change," Scott said cryptically as he walked past Evan and around the room.

Evan, in his sling, slid after Scott. "Now what's that supposed to mean?"

"You ought to come out and see what it's like out there." Scott knew he couldn't tell him. He just couldn't. But he might be able to prod Evan into finding out for himself.

Evan was shaking his head. "I don't even watch the teleset any more. Oh, don't look so sad,

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Scott. It's no big disappointment to me. When you get to be my age you learn to let go, to make concessions. That's what I'm doing and have been doing. I just do my job and the world is a little better for it. Let them talk about The Propheteer as they call me and tell my legend. They don't need to see me. Telling my story is enough. Hey!"

Scott whirled at the sound of Evan's shout.

Evan was slinging swiftly toward the computer console. The six fingers on his right hand flew over the plastic buttons as he read the tape and listened to the *tinging* of the warning bell. "Scott, murder is about to be committed in Sixth Sector!" He pressed the lever that he knew would summon the P-Men. Then he relaxed, sighed. "They'll get there in time. They always do."

Scott practically ran for the door.

"Where—"

But Scott was through the steel doors and they had closed behind him. He stood for a moment in the corridor, leaning against the wall and sweating. He could almost hear the scream of the potential murderer. It sounded a little to Scott like Evan's triumphant chuckle as he pressed the lever labeled P-Men.

Evan did not know what he had done.

And I'm too much of a coward to tell him. So the killing will continue . . .

LENORE pretended she was getting ready for Scott. She stood under the spray of the SunSet and watched her skin grow golden. There was no use trying to appear ugly. She had tried that once and Darby had merely suggested, in a soft but deadly tone, that she had better learn to play the game. When her eyes had sparked dangerously Darby had shaken a warning finger at her almost playfully. She forced her hatred into a tight ball and then she threw it far away from her and smiled with no little difficulty.

Stepping out from beneath the SunSet that had tanned her, she stared at herself in the mirror that hung like a white icicle from the center of the ceiling. A dozen Lenores, all of them beautiful, stared back at her from the mirror's many facets. She knew she could not see what she was looking for. She could not see or even feel, as she ran her fingers through her hair, the microminiaturized suction pump set in the bony receptacle of her skull. It could be activated by The Propheteer in Square Central at the push of a button. She would never hear the ultra-high frequency signal that would activate the deadly pump when the button was pushed. She would barely hear the high hiss of the oxygen being sucked from her

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brain—or her own scream. She would crumple and fall. Die. If she let herself want to kill. Darby.

Every citizen possessed the pump, Lenore knew, although they hadn't, not in the beginning, or so Scott said. But, in this world of too many people crime was a luxury that no one, least of all society, could afford. It had been good in the beginning, Scott had told her, speaking about The Propheteer's plans and his system. But like too many good things, it had become the toy of the fanatic and the perfectionist. She thought again of Darby. He was both. Darby, she had long ago learned, was a righteous man and, like so many righteous men, he needed evil. Without it he was nothing. He feasted on it, wallowed in it wherever he found it. But when he came to Lenore he called his lust love.

She finished dressing, thinking of how one man's good was another man's evil.

Darby's face appeared in the door's viewplate and she pressed the panel to admit him. As he came toward her grinning, she pretended to herself that he was Scott.

SCOTT pulled P-Man rank and dislodged a citizen from the airlift that skimmed over the hived surface of the city. Down below him the vast crowd of people moved on and off the slidewalks. Careful to avoid any overt or even inward expression of anger, they instead smiled at each other too enthusiastically, waved each other on and loudly asked to be excused or pardoned. The streets swarmed with traffic. Scott saw two autounits collide and their drivers step out and begin their false pavanne, their sly gavotte. They clapped each other on the back, shook hands—twice—and helped each other dislodge their interlocked electrofields.

The system works.

Evan had said it.

Scott felt the uneasy heat of his skin. He felt the thoughts like lurid marbles in his mind, bouncing off one another dangerously. He knew he needed the one acceptable outlet for his emotions of which his society approved—in fact, had been forced to create. He signaled to the lift operator and got off on the roof of Old Arena.

He dropped down the airshaft. In the auditorium he strapped himself into one of the reclining pallets and let his emotions loose to roam. In this dank and odorous sanctuary he was safe, he knew, from The Propheteer.

A bout was in progress. Above the sound and shouted fury of the spectators a brawny Offworlder battered a team of dwarfs who were attacking him with the marsh maces used to kill the mutated pack rats in the cobalt mines on Neptune.

The Offworlder seized one of

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the dwarfs, raised him high above his head and threw him against the force field that surrounded the multi-level arena. A blinding eruption of sparks came as the dwarf hit, fell and lay still. The crowd roared its approval.

Straining against the straps that held him, Scott yelled with the crowd and tried not to recognize his words.

"Cripple—kill the bastard—watch out for—show a little life, you—"

He stayed until all but one of the dwarfs was dead and the Offworlder had taken his bow and left the arena to be replaced by two amazonian females who circled one another warily, their amplified grunts blasting the ears of the delighted spectators.

Outside, Scott felt purged. Safe. Calm. Old Arena—one of Darby's ideas—had done its job, justified its existence. He continued his journey toward Lenore. A block away he saw a man lose control and lift his fist above the head of the child walking beside him, heard the hateful hiss of air and saw the man fall and the child merely stare as if nothing unusual had happened. Nothing unusual *had* happened and Scott spotted horror lurking just behind that fact like a lean lioness, hungering.

He was surprised to find Darby standing behind Lenore when the door swung open to admit him.

Lenore took his hand and leaned toward him. Her kiss was sudden.

"I've always loved you," she whispered in his ear. "Only you."

Scott, surprised, wanted to ask her— But she was gone across the room to where Darby gazed and grinned.

"You were off duty," Darby called to Scott. "I figured I'd find you here sooner or later."

"Sir," Scott greeted Darby uneasily.

His uneasiness was not caused by the grin of his superior but by the odd lack of light in Lenore's eyes and the hint of desperation in her greeting.

"Dear Lenore," Darby said. "Can you stand a little shop talk?"

Lenore left the room without a word.

"Sit, sit," Darby said to Scott, gesturing toward a chair beside his own.

Scott sat down and fought the strangeness of his thoughts in attentive silence.

"I've reprogramed the Allied Arts unit in the complex," Darby announced, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling.

He seems so comfortable here.

Scott pushed the thought away at once.

"I know. I mentioned it to Evan."

"Did you now? You mentioned it to Evan. Why?"

Scott hesitated. Darby was watching him closely. "Because—

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well, he's The Propheteer and I knew you'd tell him yourself in time."

"EVAN," Darby said so softly that Scott could barely hear him, "is not The Propheteer."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"I am," Darby said. "And I have been for, lo, these many fruitful years. Let me tell you something. Evan Barrister was valuable in his day. But his day is no more. I let him stay on in Square Central. He does no harm. In fact, to give the devil his due, if I may use that antique phrase, he does a great deal of good. He identifies incipient criminals and he pushes his little button to disable them."

Disable!

"He doesn't know, sir."

"Know what? Oh, you mean, about the changes I've made in the system. Of course he doesn't. Does it matter?" Darby chuckled. "He doesn't need to know. Evan, I'm afraid, is not an innovator. He is old, of course, and that is definitely part of his trouble. He is—and this is much more serious—content to let good enough alone. I am not. Good is not good enough for me. Good must be better. And better must be best! You understand, I'm sure. Treatment of criminals is a long and expensive process. The state can ill afford it. There are other things that must take priority. There is the uprising in the asteroid colony, the cost of constructing New Arena—"

Lenore came back into the room, carrying a tray on which rested a decanter and glasses.

"Evan should be retired," Darby was saying as he accepted the glass of wine Lenore held out to him. "He is out of it. I run things now and have for years."

"I know." Scott imagined Evan stored away in a dusty attic with other useless and unwanted relics of an earlier day. The thought embarrassed him.

"The Allied Arts Program," Darby continued, "is only the first of many changes I'm planning to make." He swirled the wine in its glass and sniffed its bouquet. "Crime in our society is taking ever more subtle and ingenious forms and the computer, as it is now programed, is not equipped to cope. What we need is a realignment of traditional values and, in technological terms, what that means is simply the development of new and more intricate equations to pinpoint these new and even deadlier forms of crime."

A chill coursed through Scott.

Darby said, "Life is cheap, as they used to point out. In today's world it is not just cheap—it is practically worthless. There are so many of us. But I am speaking of criminals, of course. The wine is—"

Darby paused, his lips pursed. Suddenly he spat the wine out on-

(Please turn to page 156)

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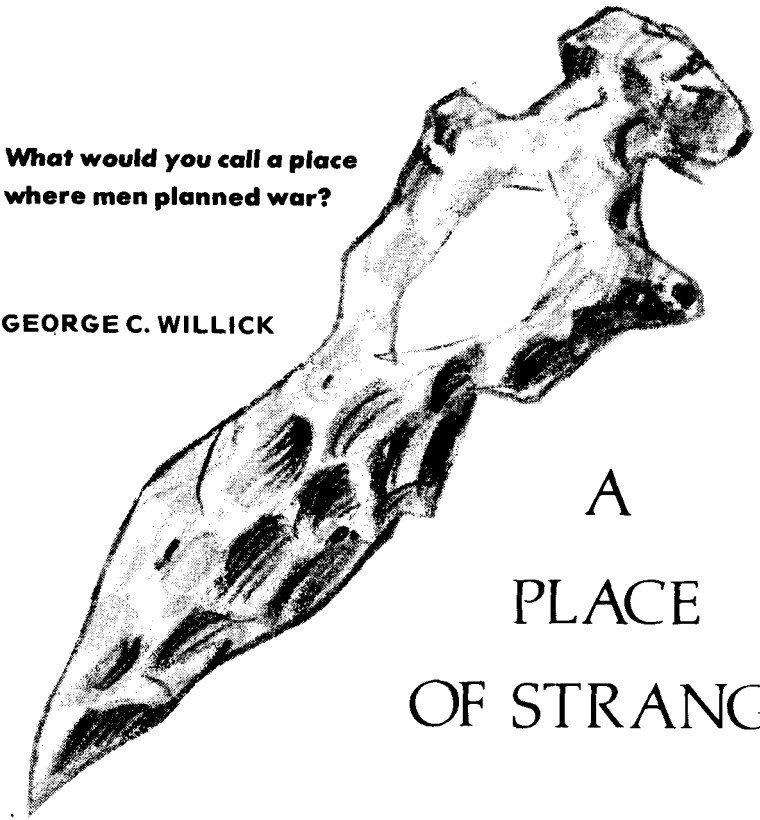
What would you call a place where men planned war?

GEORGE C. WILLICK



A PLACE OF STRANGE

BEYOND the creviced hold in the sketchland glistened the place of Strange. In its center an alabaster structure reflected continually in day's end light. Dupple would sit for hours at his vantage point in the cave, staring across the desert at the brightness, able to make out little more. The greenish tinge around the rim of the compound was the wall of thickly planted flowers and bushes that had been placed there by the beings inside. Those fellow Rai who had ventured into the place had never returned. Yet it held a deep fascination for Dupple and he was being irresistibly drawn to it.

The purpose of the flowers confounded him. Dupple sensed that they contained nothing that would cause harm or death. He was certain that his knife would cut through them easily even if they closed about him. The flowers were not carefully arranged and the

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plants seemed merely intended to circle the place of strange and give it cover. Even so they were sinister.

Dupple, come lie with me.

I am busy, mother.

As are your fathers. Come.

Later, mother. I am busy.

What can be so important that it would hold you from me?

I am sharpening a knife I have made.

That's of no importance now.

It is for the land of the strange, mother.

I care not—come to me.

In a moment. I'll be done soon.

Hurry, Dupple. I am eager.

Yes, mother. I am eager, too.

It took him some time to cut up his mother. She had become monstrous in the years of her existence and death should have been a blessing for her. Still she had protested and fought him off. No matter. He tied her food sacs together and slung them across his back. They would be important to his trip, somehow. He paused at the cave entrance only briefly to look back at the place of his lifetime and then he was scurrying across the rock and shale of the sketchland. He would find a way to enter the place of strange. He felt he had been there before. He was not like the others. He was different. He would survive and succeed. He must succeed.

He was no different from the others.

No . . .he was no different.

We take them in and they kill. Always they kill.

He will go back now?

Yes.

To die?

Can we be certain he will die? The thing that made him may take him back.

No matter now.

It matters to me. I want him dead. I want to kill him myself.

He is our son!

She was our mate and mother!

I cannot accept this.

Must I go alone?

No—no—I will come with you.

ROY CREMINS set the heavy cage down near the inner perimeter and wiped the perspiration from his forehead and neck. It was the seventieth hour of light and the temperature was becoming insufferable. He must hurry and return to the shelter of the laboratory. Unclipping the cage door, Cremins dumped the wriggling contents into the flowers. The young Rai flailed and dug its toes until it finally gained enough momentum and purpose to take refuge under a bush and pant. Cremins, satisfied, was turning away when he heard the other.

Dupple charged the alien with a thunderous rush. Cremins dropped the cage and pivoted to one side, drawing his weapon. The hapless

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Dupple crashed into the cage, waving his knife, and went down in a tangle. Cremins brought his weapon to bear, paused as his eyes caught sight of the glinting identification tag. Methodically the man reversed the weapon as Dupple arose and charged again. Cremins smashed the butt of the weapon into Dupple's soft inner head as he sidestepped again. The unconscious Rai fell stiffly to the brown turf and tried to die. Cremins leaped atop the body, crammed the weapon between toothless jaws and forced open the air passage.

"Which one is it, Roy?"

"Tag says number seventy-six."

"Just about right. Any sign of some competition?"

"No, none yet. But look at these."

"Ugh, what are those?"

"Food sacs from a female Rai. He must have killed a mother."

"Why did he drag them here?"

"I don't know. Could be an unconscious urge from his being here before—maybe proof of his mission."

"By the looks of this knife he planned on putting some proof in you."

"Hm, yes. A very successful subject, a real killer."

"Now we wait?"

"Right. Let's get him staked out in the compound and get inside."

They watched as the fathers paused in exhaustion at the inner edge of the perimeter of the place of strange. Their skins were sun-dried and the bleeding cracks sapped their energies. The thorns of the perimeter had torn further at their flesh as they had forced their way through. The chase had taken hours and they were far behind. The building in the center sat quiet and lifeless. Their attention turned to the only movement in the compound. Dupple had sensed their presence and bucked desperately against his stake. But the chain held fast and his grasping appendages were still just short of the knife left lying out of reach.

You see, he is not dead.

The sun will kill him. We can stay and watch.

No. He is shielded from above. The sun does not touch him.

We cannot kill him.

I must.

No.

Yes. You must help me.

Never.

Then leave me.

I will become lost and perish.

I care not. He must die.

Let me watch. I shall be your witness for the tribe.

Done, then.

The cameras turned slowly and quietly and the doctors held their breaths as the Rai moved into the clearing and paused, sensing the air. Dupple appeared to know that something was different in his father's presence and began mak-

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ing screeching, pleading sounds. The Rai advanced slowly, poised, lunged forward. The pair closed in physical contact more violent than had ever been witnessed on the planet before. From under the clouds of dust it soon became apparent that the father was in trouble. Dupple had been psychologically prepared in the laboratory for killing and had just recently done so and, although the father fought well, he was losing. Suddenly the other Rai rushed in from the perimeter. Scooping up the knife, he plunged the blade into Dupple. Again and again. The adult Rais took turns slashing in the blood until there was nothing left of their son. Satisfied at last, they withdrew into the flowers.

We must destroy those who staked Dupple and built the place of strange.

Yes, it is against us. We must kill them.

The others will help when they hear.

They must take no more of our brood from us.

We shall make knives to aid us.

We will win.

First, we must kill those they sent among us.

Yes, first.

THE starship rested magnificently on a ridge overlooking the sketchland and the laboratory. Its ferry had settled on the top of the building and its contents of data were being loaded aboard. Haste was dictated by the coming of twilight and the dust storms. The feeling of danger was everywhere, yet the Rai continued to come and hide in the perimeter. After the loading was completed the scientists paused before boarding for a brief and final look at their altered planet.

"Did you leave the pictures of Rai's using slings and spears in position?"

"Yes, sir, all placed. I even made a couple of makeshift weapons to give them the idea."

"They're out there in the flowers, gathering strength. I saw several a few moments ago."

"I guess we're getting off just in time. I doubt they'll leave a stone of this place standing."

"So—we have left our heritage of violent death to this planet and its people. It makes me sick."

"I feel it, too. There must be a way for simple survival to change into civilization without war. There must be."

"Is that why we search the stars? To find another way—or just to spread our way of horror?"

"Maybe our Rai will show us some day."

The men boarded the small craft. As it lifted skyward a puny spear sped toward it and glanced helplessly off the field. The first Rai effort to bring peace went unnoticed. ★

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DOWNWARD TO THE EARTH

CONCLUSION

ROBERT SILVERBERG

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

EDMUND GUNDERSEN, former sector chief on Holman's World, an Earth colony, returns to the planet to do voluntary penance for his treatment of its indigenes, an intelligent elephantine life form, to whom the planet has been restored.

The native nildoror initiate him to their rites and he is at once shocked and surprised to discover that he is able to share himself

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completely with them—to the point of losing his human identity entirely and becoming in effect one of them. He requests and is given permission to accompany his hosts on their dangerous journey to the mist country to witness—and possibly partake in—their most sacred ritual, Rebirth.

His understanding of his hosts deepens during the trip—as does his understanding of the planet. And of the dangers of going native. His trail crosses that of several leftover humans literally destroyed by the planet—including SEENA, the woman Gundersen had once loved, and KURTZ, her husband, whom Rebirth has transformed into a monster. Part of Gundersen's deal with his hosts is to find and deliver to them his former associate, CULLEN, who is hiding in the mist country after having committed an unnamed offense.

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XIII

IT WAS a substantial settlement, forty huts or more arranged in two rows, flanked on one side by a grove of soaring trees and on the other by a broad silvery-surfaced lake. Gundersen approached the village through the trees, the lake shining beyond. A light fall of snowflakes wandered through the quiet air. The mists were high just now, thickening to an impenetrable ceiling perhaps five hundred meters overhead.

"The man Cullen?" Gundersen asked.

Cullen lay in a hut beside the lake. Two sulidoror guarded the entrance, stepping aside at a word from Yi-gartigok; two more sulidoror stood at the foot of the pallet of twigs and hides on which Cullen rested. They, too, stepped aside, revealing a burned-out husk of a man, a remnant, a cinder.

"Are you here to fetch me?" Cullen asked. "Well, Gundy, you're too late."

Cullen's golden hair had turned white and gone coarse; it was a tangled snowy mat through which patches of pale blotched scalp showed. His eyes, once a gentle liquid green, now were muddy and dull, with angry bloodshot streaks in the yellowed whites. His face was a mask of skin over bones and the skin was flaky and rough. A blanket covered him from the chest down but the severe emaciation of his arms indicated that the rest of his body probably was similarly eroded. Of the old Cullen little seemed to remain except the mild, pleasant voice and the cheerful smile, now grotesque, emerging from the ravaged face. He looked like a man of a hundred years.

"How long have you been this way?" Gundersen demanded.

"Two months. Three, I don't know. Time melts here, Gundy. But there's no going back for me now. This is where I stop. Terminal. Terminal."

Gundersen knelt by the sick man's pallet. "Are you in pain? Can I give you something?"

"No pain," Cullen said. "No drugs. Terminal."

"What do you have?" Gundersen asked, thinking of Dykstra and his woman lying gnawed by alien larvae in a pool of muck, thinking of Kurtz anguished and transformed at Shangri-la Falls, thinking of Seena's tale of Gio' Salamone turned to crystal. "A native disease? Something you picked up around here?"

"Nothing exotic," said Cullen. "I'd guess it's the old inward rot, the ancient enemy. The crab, Gundy. The crab. In the gut. The crab's pincers are in my gut."

"Then you are in pain?"

"No," Cullen said. "The crab moves slowly. A nip here, a nip there. Each day there's a little less of me. Some days I feel that there's nothing left of me at all. This is one of the better days."

"Listen," Gundersen said, "I could get you downriver to Seena's place in a week. She's bound to have a medical kit, a spare tube of anticarcin for you. You aren't so far gone that we couldn't manage a remission if we

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act fast. And then we could ship you to Earth for template renewal and—"

"No. Forget it."

"Don't be absurd. We aren't living in the middle ages, Ced. A case of cancer is no reason for a man to lie down in a filthy hut and wait to die. The sulidoror will set up a litter for you. I can arrange it in five minutes. And then—"

"I wouldn't ever reach Seena's and you know it," Cullen said softly. "The nildoror would pick me up the moment I came out of the mist country. You know that, too, Gundy. You have to know that."

"Well—"

"I don't have the energy to play these games. You're aware, aren't you, that I'm the most wanted man on this planet?"

"I suppose so."

"Were you sent here to fetch me?"

"The nildoror asked me to bring you back," Gundersen admitted. "I had to agree to it in order to get permission to come up here."

"Of course." Bitterly.

"But I stipulated that I wouldn't bring you out unless you'd come willingly," Gundersen said. "I also insisted on certain other conditions. Look, Ced, I'm not here as Judas. I want to help you. Let me bring you down to Seena's so you can get the treatment that you have to—"

"I told you," Cullen said, "the nildoror would grab me as soon as they had a chance."

"Even if they knew you were mortally ill and being taken down to the falls for medical attention?"

"Especially so. They'd love to save my soul as I lay dying. I won't give them the satisfaction, Gundy. I'm going to stay here, safe, beyond their reach, and wait for the crab to finish with me. It won't be long now. Two days, three, a week, perhaps the end will come even tonight."

"If I got a promise from the nildoror to let you alone until you were able to undergo treat—"

"I won't go. You'd have to force me. And that's outside the scope of your promise to the nildoror, isn't it?" Cullen smiled for the first time in some minutes. "There's a flask of wine in the corner there. Be a good fellow."

Gundersen went to get it. He had to walk around several sulidoror. His colloquy with Cullen had been so intense, so private, that he had quite forgotten that the hut was full of sulidoror: his two guides, Cullen's guards, and at least half a dozen others. He picked up the wine and carried it to the pallet. Cullen, his hand trembling nevertheless managed not to spill any.

"Is it agreed," Cullen said, "that you won't make any attempt to take me out of this village? I know you wouldn't seriously consider handing me over to the nildoror. But you might decide to get me out of here for the sake of saving my life. Don't do that either—because the effect would be the same. The nildoror would get me. I stay here. Agreed?"

Gundersen was silent a while. "Agreed," he said finally.

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CULLEN looked relieved. He lay back, face toward the wall, and said, "I wish you hadn't wasted so much of my energy on that one point. We have so much more to talk about. And now I don't have the strength."

"I'll come back later. Rest, now."

"No. Stay here. Talk to me. Tell me where you've been all these years, why you came back here, whom you've seen, what you've done. Give me the whole story. I'll rest while I'm listening. And afterward—and afterward—"

Cullen's voice faded. It seemed to Gundersen that he had slipped into unconsciousness or perhaps merely into sleep. Cullen's eyes were closed; his breath was slow and labored. Gundersen remained silent. He paced the hut uneasily, studying the hides tacked to the walls, the crude furniture, the debris of old meals. The sulidoror ignored him. Now there were eight in the hut, keeping their distance from the dying man and yet focusing all their attention on him. Momentarily Gundersen was unnerved by the presence of these giant two-legged beasts, these nightmare creatures with fangs and claws and thick tails and drooping snouts, who came and went and moved about as though he were less than nothing to them.

Cullen said, eyes still shut, "I'm waiting. Tell me things."

Gundersen began to speak. He spoke of his eight years on Earth, collapsing them into six curt sentences. He spoke of the restlessness that had come over him on Earth, of his cloudy and mystifying compulsion to return to Belzagor, of the sense of a need to find a new structure for his life now that he had lost the scaffolding that the Company had been for him. He spoke of his journey through the forest to the lakeside encampment and of how he had danced among the nildoror—and how they had wrung from him the qualified promise to bring them Cullen. He spoke of Dykstra and his woman in their forest ruin, editing the tale somewhat out of respect for Cullen's own condition, though he suspected that such charity was unnecessary. He spoke of being with Seena again on the Night of Five Moons. He spoke of Kurtz and how he had been changed through rebirth. He spoke of his pilgrimage into the mist country.

He was certain at least three times that Cullen had fallen asleep, and once he thought that the sick man's breathing had ceased altogether. Each time Gundersen paused, though, Cullen gave some faint indication—a twitch of the mouth, a flick of the fingertips—that he should go on. At the end, when Gundersen had nothing left to say, he stood in silence a long while, waiting for some new sign from Cullen.

At last, faintly, Cullen said, "Then?"

"Then I came here."

"And where do you go after here?"

"To the mountain of rebirth," said Gundersen quietly.

Cullen's eyes opened. With a

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nod he asked that his pillows be propped up and he sat forward, locking his fingers into his coverlet.

"Why do you want to go there?"

"To find out what kind of thing rebirth is."

"You saw Kurtz?"

"Yes."

"He also wanted to learn more about rebirth," Cullen said. "He already understood the mechanics of it but he had to know its inwardness as well. To try it for himself. It wasn't just curiosity, of course. Kurtz had spiritual troubles. He was courting self-immolation because he'd persuaded himself he needed to atone for his whole life. Quite true, too. Quite true. So he went for rebirth. The sulidoror obliged him. Well, behold the man. I saw him just before I came north."

"For a while I thought I might try rebirth also," said Gundersen, caught unawares by the words surfacing in his mind. "For the same reasons. The mixture of curiosity and guilt. But I think I've given up the idea now. I'll go to the mountain to see what they do but I doubt that I'll ask them to do it to me."

"Because of the way Kurtz looks?"

"Partly. And also because my original plan looks too—well, too willed. Too unspontaneous. An intellectual choice, not an act of faith. You can't just go up there and volunteer for rebirth in a coldly scientific way. You have to be driven to it."

"As Kurtz was?" Cullen asked.

"Exactly."

"And as you aren't?"

"I don't know any longer," Gundersen said. "I thought I was driven, too. I told Seena I was. But somehow, now that I'm so close to the mountain, the whole quest has started to seem artificial to me."

"You're sure you aren't just afraid to go through with it?"

Gundersen shrugged.

"Kurtz wasn't a pretty sight."

"There are good rebirths and bad rebirths," Cullen said. "He had a bad rebirth. How it turns out depends on the quality of one's soul, I gather, and on a lot of other things. Give us some more wine, will you?"

Gundersen extended the flask. Cullen, who appeared to be gaining strength, drank deeply.

"Have you been through rebirth?" Gundersen asked.

"Me? Never. Never even been tempted. But I know a good deal about it. Kurtz wasn't the first of us to try it, of course. At least a dozen went before him."

"Who?"

Cullen mentioned some names. They were Company men, all of them from the list of those who had died while on field duty. Gundersen had known some of them. Others were figures out of the far past, from before he or Cullen had ever come to Holman's World.

Cullen said, "And there were others. Kurtz looked them up in the records and the nildoror gave him the rest of the story. None of them ever returned from the mist country. Four or five of them turned out like Kurtz—trans-

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formed into horrible monsters."

"And the others?"

"Into archangels, I suppose. The nildoror were vague about it. Some sort of transcendental merging with the universe, an evolution to the next bodily level, a sublime ascent—that kind of thing. All that's certain is that they never came back to Company territory. Kurtz was hoping for an outcome like that. But unfortunately Kurtz was Kurtz, half angel and half demon—and that's how he was reborn. And that's what Seena nurses. In a way it's a pity you've lost your urge, Gundy. You might just turn out to have one of the good rebirths. Can you call Hortenebor over? I think I should have some fresh air if we're going to talk so much. He's the sulidor leaning against the wall there. The one who looks after me, who hauls my old bones around. He'll carry me outside."

"It was snowing a little while ago, Ced."

"So much the better. Shouldn't a dying man see some snow? This is the most beautiful place in the universe," Cullen said. "Right here in front of this hut. I want to see it. Get me Hor-tenebor."

GUNDERSEN summoned the sulidor. At a word from Cullen, Hor-tenebor scooped the fragile, shrunken invalid into his immense arms and bore him through the door flap of the hut, setting him down on a cradlelike framework overlooking the lake. Gundersen followed. A heavy mist had descended on the village, concealing even the huts closest at hand, but the lake itself was clearly visible under the gray sky. Fugitive wisps of mist hung just above the lake's dull surface. A bitter chill was in the air but Cullen, wrapped only in a thin hide, showed no discomfort. He held out his hand, palm upraised, and watched with the wonder of a child as snowflakes struck it.

At length Gundersen said, "Will you answer a question?"

"If I can."

"What was it you did that got the nildoror so upset?"

"They didn't tell you when they sent you after me?"

"No," Gundersen said. "They said that you would—and that in any case it didn't really matter to them whether I knew or not. Seena didn't know either. And I can't begin to guess. You were never the kind who went in for killing or torturing intelligent species. You couldn't have been playing around with the serpent venom the way Kurtz was—he was doing that for years and they never tried to grab him. So what could you possibly have done that caused so much—"

"The sin of Actaeon," said Cullen.

"Pardon?"

"The sin of Actaeon, which was no sin at all but really just an accident. In Greek myth he was a huntsman who blundered upon Diana bathing and saw what he shouldn't have seen. She changed him into a stag and he was torn to pieces by his own hounds."

"I don't understand what that has to do with—"

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Cullen drew a long breath. "Did you ever go up on the central plateau?" he asked, his voice low but firm. "Yes. Yes, of course you did. I remember, you crashlanded there, you and Seena, on your way back to Fire Point after a holiday on the coast. You were stranded a little while and weird animals bothered you and that was when Seena first started to hate the plateau. Right? Then you know what a strange and somehow mysterious place it is, a place apart from the rest of this planet, where not even the nildoror like to go. All right. I started to go there, a year or two after relinquishment. It became my private retreat. The animals of the plateau interested me, the insects, the plants, everything. Even the air had a special taste—sweet, clean. Before relinquishment, you know, it would have been considered a little eccentric for anybody to visit the plateau on his free time—or at any other time. Afterward nothing mattered to anyone. The world was mine. I made a few plateau trips. I collected specimens. I brought some little oddities to Seena and she got to be fond of them before she realized they were from the plateau—and little by little I helped her overcome her irrational fear of the plateau. Seena and I went there often together, sometimes with Kurtz also. There's a lot of flora and fauna from the plateau at Shangri-la Station, as maybe you noticed. Right? We collected all that. The plateau came to seem like any other place to me, nothing supernatural, nothing eerie, merely a neglected backwoods region. And it was my specia place, where I went whenever I felt myself growing empty or bored or stale. A year ago, maybe a little less than a year, I went to the plateau. Kurtz had just come back from his rebirth and Seena was terribly depressed by what had happened to him—and I wanted to get her a gift, some animal, to cheer her up. This time I came down a little to the southwest of my usual landing zone, over in a part of the plateau I had never seen before, where two rivers meet. One of the first things I noticed was how ripped-up the shrubbery was. Nildoror! Plenty nildoror! An immense area had been grazed—you know how nildoror graze. It made me curious. Once in a while I had seen an isolated nildor on the plateau—always at a distance—but never a whole herd. So I followed the line of devastation. On and on it went, this scar through the forest, with broken branches and trampled underbrush, all the usual signs. Night came and I camped. And it seemed to me I heard drums in the night. Which was foolish, since nildoror don't use drums. I realized after a while that I heard them dancing, pounding the ground and that the sounds were reverberations carried through the soil. There were other noises, too: screams, bellows, the cries of frightened animals. I had to know what was happening. So I broke camp in the middle of the night and crept through the jungle, hearing the noise grow louder and louder. Finally I reached the edge of the trees, where the jungle gave way to a kind of broad savannah

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running down to the river. And there in the open were maybe five hundred nildoror. Three moons were up and I had no trouble seeing, Gundy, would you believe that they had painted themselves? Like savages—like something out of a nightmare. There were three deep pits in the middle of the clearing. One of the pits was filled with a kind of wet red mud. The other two contained branches and berries and leaves that the nildoror had trampled to release dark pigments, one black, one blue. I watched the nildoror going down to these pits. First they'd roll in the pit of red mud and come up plastered with it, absolutely scarlet. Next they'd go to the adjoining pits and give each other dark stripes over the red, hosing it on with their trunks. A barbaric sight—all that color, all that flesh. When they were properly decorated, they'd go running—not strolling, running—across the field to the place of dancing and they'd begin that four-step routine. You know it: boom boom *boom* boom. But infinitely more fierce and frightening now on account of the warpaint. An army of wild-looking nildoror, stamping their feet, nodding their tremendous heads, lifting their trunks, bellowing, stabbing their tusks into the ground, capering, singing, flapping their ears. Frightening, Gundy, frightening. And the moonlight on their painted bodies.

"KEEPING well back in the forest, I circled around to the west to get a better view. And saw something on the far side of the dancers that was even stranger than the paint. I saw a corral with log walls—huge, three or four times the size of this village. The nildoror couldn't have built it alone; they might have uprooted trees and hauled them with their trunks but they must have needed sulidoror to help pile them up and shape them. Inside the corral were plateau animals, hundreds of them, all sizes and shapes. The big leaf-eating ones with giraffe necks and the kind like rhinos with antlers. Timid ones like gazelles and dozens that I'd never even seen before. They were all crowded together as if in a stockyard. Sulidoror hunters must have been out beating the bush for days to drive that menagerie together. The animals were restless and scared. So was I. I crouched in the darkness, waiting. Finally all the nildoror were properly painted and a ritual started in the midst of the dancing group. They began to cry out, mostly in their ancient language, the one we can't understand—but they were also talking in ordinary nildororu and eventually I understood what was going on. Do you know who these painted beasts were? They were sinning nildoror, nildoror who were in disgrace. This was the place of atonement and the festival of purification. Any nildor who had been tinged with corruption in the past year had to come here and be cleansed. Gundy, do you know what sin they had commited? They had taken the venom from Kurtz. The old game, the one everybody used to play down at the serpent

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station, give the nildoror a swig, take one yourself, let the hallucinations come? These painted prancing nildoror here had all been led astray by Kurtz. Their souls were stained. The Earthman-devil had found their one vulnerable place, the one area of temptation they couldn't resist. So here they were, trying to cleanse themselves. The central plateau is the nildoror purgatory. They don't live there because they need it for their rites and obviously you don't set up an ordinary encampment in a holy place.

"They danced, Gundy, for hours. But that wasn't the rite of atonement. It was only the prelude to the rite. They danced until I was dizzy from watching and hearing —the red bodies, the dark stripes, the boom of their feet—and then, when no moons were left in the sky, when dawn was near, the real ceremony started. I watched it—and I looked right down into the darkness of the race, into the real nildoror soul. Two old nildoror approached the corral and started kicking down the gate. They broke an opening maybe ten meters wide, stepped back and the penned-up animals came rushing out onto the plain. The animals were terrified from all the noise and dancing and from being imprisoned. They ran in circles, not knowing what to do or where to go. And the rest of the nildoror charged into them. The peaceful, noble, non-violent nildoror, you know? Snorting. Trampling. Spearing with their tusks. Lifting animals with their trunks and hurling them into trees. An orgy of slaughter. I became sick, just watching. A nildor can be a terrible machine of death. All that weight, those tusks, the trunk, the big feet—everything berserk, all restraints off. Some of the animals escaped, of course. But most were trapped right in the middle of the chaos. Crushed bodies everywhere, rivers of blood—scavengers came out of the forest to have dinner while the killing was still going on. That's how the nildoror atone: sin for sin. That's how they purge themselves. The plateau is where they loose their violence, Gundy. They put aside all their restraints and let out the beast that's within them. I've never felt such horror as when I watched how they cleansed their souls. You know how much respect I had for the nildoror. Still have. But to see a thing like that, a massacre, a vision of hell—Gundy, I was numb with despair. The nildoror didn't seem to enjoy the killing but they weren't hesitant about it, either—they just went on and on because it had to be done, because this was the form of the ceremony and they thought nothing more of it than Socrates would think of sacrificing a lamb to Zeus, a cock to Aesculapius. That was the real horror, I think. I watched the nildoror destroying life for the sake of their souls and it was like dropping through a trapdoor, entering a new world whose existence I had never even suspected, a dark new world beneath the old. Then dawn came. The sun rose, lovely, golden, light glistening on the trampled corpses—and the nildoror were sitting calmly in the midst of the

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devastation, resting, calm, purged, all their inner storms over. It was amazingly peaceful. They had wrestled with their demons and they had won. They had come through all the night's horror, all the ghastliness, and—I don't know how—they really *were* purged and purified. I can't tell you how to find salvation through violence and destruction. It's alien to me and probably to you. Kurtz knew, though. He took the same road as the nildoror. He fell and fell and fell, through level after level of evil, enjoying his corruption, glorying in depravity, and then in the end he was still able to judge himself and find himself wanting, and recoil at the darkness he found inside himself, and so he went and sought rebirth, and showed that the angel within him wasn't altogether dead. This finding of purity by passing through evil—you'll have to come to terms with it by yourself, Gundy. I can't help you. All I can do is tell you of the vision I had at sunrise that morning beside the field of blood. I looked into an abyss. I peered over the edge, and saw where Kurtz had gone, where these nildoror had gone. Where perhaps you'll go. I couldn't follow.

"And then they almost caught me.

"THEY picked up my scent. While the frenzy was on them I guess they hadn't noticed—especially with hundreds of animals giving off fear-smells in the corral. But they began to sniff. Trunks started to rise and move around like periscopes. The odor of sacrilege was on the air. The reek of a blaspheming, spying Earthman. Five, ten minutes they sniffed while I stood in the bushes, still wrapped in my vision, not even remotely realizing they were sniffing me. But suddenly it dawned on me that they knew I was there. I turned and began to slip away through the forest and they came after me. Dozens. Can you imagine what it's like to be chased through the jungle by a herd of angry nildoror? But I could fit through places too small for them. I gave them the slip. I ran and ran and ran—until I fell down dizzy in a thicket and vomited. I rested until then I heard them bashing along on my trail and I ran some more. I came to a swamp and jumped in, hoping they'd lose my scent. I hid in the reeds and marshes, while things I couldn't see nipped at me from below. And the nildoror ringed the entire region. We know you're in there, they called to me. Come out. Come out. We forgive you and we wish to purify you. They explained it all quite reasonably to me. I had inadvertently—oh, of course, inadvertently, they were diplomatic—seen a ceremony that no one but a nildor was allowed to see and now it would be necessary to wipe what I had seen from my mind, which could be managed by means of a simple technique that they didn't bother to describe to me. A drug, I guess. They invited me to come have part of my mind blotted out. I didn't accept. I didn't say anything. They went right on talking, telling me that they held no

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malice, that they realized it obviously hadn't been my intention to watch their secret ceremony—but nevertheless since I had seen it they must now take steps, et cetera, et cetera. I began to crawl downstream, breathing through a hollow reed. When I surfaced the nildoror were still calling to me. Now they sounded angry, as far as it's possible to tell such a thing. They seemed annoyed that I had refused to come out. They didn't blame me for spying on them but they did object that I wouldn't let them purify me. That was my real crime—not that I hid in the bushes and watched them but declined afterward to undergo the treatment. That's what they still want me for. I stayed in the creek all day. When it got dark I slithered out and picked up the vector-beep of my beetle, which turned out to be about half a kilometer away. I expected to find it guarded by nildoror but it wasn't. I got in, cleared out fast and landed at Seena's place by midnight. I knew I didn't have much time. The nildoror would be after me from one side of the continent to the other. I told her what had happened, more or less, collected some supplies and took off for the mist country. The sulidoror would give me sanctuary. They're jealous of their sovereignty—blasphemy or not, I'd be safe here. I came to this village. I explored the mist country a good bit. Then one day I felt the crab in my gut and I knew it was all over. Since then I've been waiting for the end, and the end isn't far away."

He fell silent.

Gundersen, after a pause, asked, "But why not risk going back? Whatever the nildoror want to do to you can't be as bad as sitting on the porch of a sulidor hut and dying of cancer."

Cullen made no reply.

"What if they give you a memory-wiping drug?" Gundersen asked. "Isn't it better to lose a bit of your past than to lose your whole future? If you'll only come back, Ced, and let us treat your disease—"

"The trouble with you, Gundy, is that you're too logical," Cullen said. "Such a sensible, reasonable, rational chap! There's another flask of wine inside. Would you bring it out?"

Gundersen walked past the crouching sulidoror into the hut and prowled the musty darkness a few moments, looking for the wine. As he searched, the solution to the Cullen situation presented itself: instead of bringing Cullen to the medicine, he would bring the medicine to Cullen. He would abandon his journey toward the rebirth mountain at least temporarily and go down to Shangri-la Falls to get a dose of anticarcin for him. It might not be too late to check the cancer. Afterward, restored to health, Cullen could face the nildoror or not, as he pleased. What happens between him and the nildoror, Gundersen told himself, will not be a matter that concerns me. I regard my treaty with Vol'himyor as fulfilled.

He located the wine and went outside with it.

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Cullen leaned backward on the cradle, his chin on his chest, his eyes closed, his breath slow, as if his lengthy monologue had exhausted him. Gundersen did not disturb him. He put the wine down and walked away, strolling for more than an hour, thinking, reaching no conclusions.

He returned. Cullen had not moved.

"Still asleep?" Gundersen asked the sulidoror.

"It is the long sleep," one of them replied.

XIV

THE mist came in close, bringing jewels of frost that hung from every tree, every hut. By the brink of the leaden lake Gundersen cremated Cullen's wasted body with one long fiery burst of the fusion torch, while sulidoror looked on, silent, solemn. The soil sizzled a while when he had finished and the mist whirled wildly as cold air rushed in to fill the zone of warmth his torch had made.

Within the hut were a few unimportant possessions. Gundersen searched through them, hoping to find a journal, a memoir, anything with the imprint of Cedric Cullen's soul and personality. But he found only some rusted tools, a box of dried insects and lizards and faded clothing. He left these things where he found them.

The sulidoror brought him a cold dinner. They let him eat undisturbed on the wooden cradle outside Cullen's hut. Darkness came and he retreated into the hut to sleep. Se-holomir and Yi-gartigok posted themselves as guards before the entrance, although he had not asked them to stay there. Early in the evening he fell asleep.

He dreamed, oddly, not of the newly dead Cullen but of the still living Kurtz. He saw Kurtz trekking through the mist country, the old Kurtz, not yet metamorphosed to his present state: infinitely tall, pale, eyes burning in the domed skull, glowing with strange intelligence. Kurtz carried a pilgrim's staff and strode tirelessly forward into the mist. Accompanying him, yet not really with him, was a procession of nildoror, their green bodies stained bright red by pigmented mud; they halted whenever Kurtz halted. They kneeled beside him and, from time to time, he let them drink from a sleek tubular canteen he was carrying. Whenever Kurtz offered his canteen to the nildoror, he and not they underwent a transformation. His lips joined in a smooth sealing; his nose lengthened; his eyes, his fingers, his toes, his legs, changed and changed again. Fluid, mobile, Kurtz kept no form for long. At one stage in the journey he became a sulidor in all respects but one—his own high-vaulted bald head surmounted the massive hairy body. Then the fur melted from him, the claws shrank and he took on another form—became a lean loping thing, rapacious and swift, with double-jointed elbows and long spindly legs. More changes followed. The nildoror sang hymns of adoration, chanting in thick monotonous skeins of gray sound.

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Kurtz was gracious. He bowed, smiled, waved. He passed around his canteen, which never needed replenishing. He rippled through cycle upon cycle of dizzy metamorphoses. From his backpack he drew gifts that he distributed among the nildoror: torches, knives, books, message cubes, computers, statues, color organs, butterflies, flasks of wine, sensors, transport modules, musical instruments, beads, old etchings, holy medallions, baskets of flowers, bombs, flares, shoes, keys, toys, spears. Each gift fetched ecstatic sighs and snorts and moos of gratitude from the nildoror; they frolicked about him, lifting their new treasures in their trunks, excitedly displaying them to one another.

You see? Kurtz cried. *I am your benefactor. I am your friend. I am the resurrection and the life.*

They came now to the place of rebirth, not a mountain in Gundersen's dream but rather an abyss, dark and deep, at the rim of which the nildoror gathered and waited. And Kurtz, undergoing so many transformations that his body flickered and shifted from moment to moment, now wearing horns, now covered with scales, now clad in shimmering flame, walked forward while the nildoror cheered him, saying to him, *This is the place, rebirth will be yours.*

He stepped into the abyss, which enfolded him in absolute night. And then from the depths of the pit came a single prolonged cry, a shrill wail of terror and dismay so awful that it awakened Gundersen, who lay sweating and shivering for hours waiting for dawn.

IN THE morning he shouldered his pack and made signs of departing. Se-holomir and Yi-gartigok came to him.

One of the sulidoror asked, "Where will you go now?"

"North."

"Shall we go with you?"

"I'll go alone," Gundersen said.

It would be a difficult journey, perhaps a dangerous one, but not impossible. He had direction-finding equipment, food concentrates, a power supply and other such material. He had the necessary stamina. He knew that the sulidoror villages along the way would extend hospitality to him if he needed it. But he hoped not to need it. He had been escorted long enough, first by Srin'gahar, then by various sulidoror—he felt he should finish this pilgrimage without a guide.

Two hours after sunrise he set out.

The air was crisp and cool and clear and the mist was high. He could see surprisingly far in all directions. He went through the forest behind the village and emerged on a fair-sized hill, from the top of which he was able to gauge the landscape ahead. He saw rugged, heavily forested country, much broken by rivers and streams and lakes—and he succeeded in glimpsing the tip of the mountain of rebirth, a jagged sentinel in the north. That rosy peak on the horizon seemed close enough to grasp. Just reach out; just extend the fingers. And the fissures and hillocks and

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slopes that separated him from his goal were no challenge; they could be traversed in a few quick bounds. His body felt eager for the attempt —heartbeat steady, vision exceptionally keen, legs moving smoothly and tirelessly. He sensed an inward soaring of the soul, a restrained but ecstatic upsweep toward life and power; the phantoms that had veiled him for so many years were dropping away; in this chill zone of mist and snow he felt annealed, purified, tempered, ready to accept whatever must be accepted. A strange energy surged through him. He did not mind the thinness of the air, nor the cold, nor the bleakness of the land. It was a morning of unusual clarity. Bright sunlight cascaded through the lofty covering of fog and imparted a dreamlike brilliance to the trees and the bare soil. He walked steadily onward.

THE mist closed in at midday. The giant trees became serious obstacles; their gnarled roots and writhing buttresses now were traps for unwary feet. He picked his way with care. Then he entered a region where large flat-topped boulders jutted at shallow angles from the ground, one after another. Slick, mist-slippery slabs formed stepping stones to the land beyond. He had to crawl over them, blindly feeling along, not knowing how much of a drop he was likely to encounter at the far end of each boulder. Jumping off was an act of faith; one of the drops turned out to be about four meters and he landed hard, so that his ankles tingled for fifteen minutes afterward. Now he felt the first fatigue of the day spreading through his thighs and knees. But yet the mood of controlled ecstasy, sober and nevertheless jubilant, remained with him.

He made a late lunch beside a small, flawlessly circular pond, mirror-bright, rimmed by tall narrow-trunked trees and hemmed in by a tight band of mist. He relished the privacy, the solitude of the place; it was like a spherical room with walls of cotton, within which he was perfectly isolated from a perplexing universe. He was reluctant to leave.

As he was gathering his belongings an unwelcome sound punctured his seclusion: the drone of an engine not far overhead. Shading his eyes against the glare of the mist, he looked up and after a moment caught a glimpse of an airborne beetle flying just below the cloud ceiling. The snubnosed little vehicle moved in a tight circle, as if looking for something.

For me?

He wondered. A moment later the beetle was gone, vanishing in a bank of fog just to the west. But the magic of the afternoon was shattered.

An hour's march through a forest of slender trees with red gummy-looking bark and Gundersen encountered three sulidoror, the first he had seen since parting from Yi-gartigok and Si-holomir that morning. These three evidently were a hunting party returning to a nearby village; two of them carried, lashed to a pole slung from

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shoulder to shoulder, the trussed-up carcass of some large four-legged grazing animal with velvety black skin and long, recurved horns. He felt a quick instinctive jolt of fear at the sight of the three gigantic creatures—but to his surprise the fear faded almost as rapidly as it came. The sulidoror, for all their ferocious mien, simply did not hold a threat. True, they could kill him with a slap but what of that? They had no more reason to attack him than he had to burn them with his torch. And, here in their natural surroundings, they did not even seem bestial or savage. Large, yes. Powerful. Mighty of fang and claw. But natural, fitting, proper, and so not terrifying.

"Does the traveler journey well?" asked the lead sulidor, the one who bore no part of the burden of the kill. He spoke in a soft and civil tone, using the language of the nildoror.

"The traveler journeys well," said Gundersen. He improvised a return salutation: "Is the forest kind to the huntsmen?"

"As you see, the huntsmen have fared well. If your path goes toward our village you are welcome to come share our kill this night."

"I go toward the mountain of rebirth."

"Our village lies in that direction. Will you come?"

He accepted the offer, for night was coming on and a harsh wind was slicing through the trees. The sulidoror village was a small one, at the foot of a sheer cliff half an hour's walk to the northeast. Gundersen passed a pleasant night there. The villagers were courteous, though aloof in a manner wholly free of any hostility. They gave him a corner of a hut, supplied him with food and drink and left him alone. In the morning they brought him fruits and fish and he took his leave.

The second day of his journey alone was not as rewarding as the first. The weather was bad, cold and damp and frequently snowy, with dense mist hanging low nearly all the time. He wasted much of the morning by trapping himself in a cul-de-sac, a long ridge of hills to his right, another to his left and, unexpectedly, a broad and uncrossable lake appearing in front of him. Swimming it was unthinkable—he might have to pass several hours in its frigid water and he would not survive the exposure. So he had to go on a wearying eastward detour over the lesser ridge of hills, which swung him about so that by midday he was in no higher a latitude than he had known the night before. The sight of the fog-wreathed rebirth mountain drew him on, though, and for two hours of the afternoon he had the illusion that he was making up for the morning's delay, only to discover that he was cut off by a swift and vast river flowing from west to east, evidently the one that fed the lake that had blocked him earlier. He did not dare to swim this, either—the current would sweep him into the distant ocean before he had reached the farther bank. Instead he used up more than an hour in following the river upstream, until he came to a place where he might

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ford it. It was even wider here than below but its bed looked much more shallow and some geological upheaval had strewn a line of boulders across it like a necklace, from bank to bank. A dozen of the boulders jutted up, white water swirling around them—the others, though submerged, were visible just below the surface. Gundersen started across. He was able to hop from the top of one boulder to the next, keeping dry until he had gone nearly a third of the way. Then he had to scramble in the water, wading shin-deep, slipping and groping. The mist enveloped him. He might have been alone in the universe, with nothing ahead but billows of whiteness, nothing to the rear but the same. He could see no trees, no shore, not even the boulders awaiting him. He concentrated rigidly on keeping his footing and staying to his path. Putting one foot down awry, he slid and toppled, landing in a half-crouch in the river, drenched to the armpits, buffeted by the current and so dizzied for a moment that he could not rise. After a few minutes he found the strength to get to his feet again and tottered forward, gasping, until he reached a boulder whose upper face stood half a meter above the water. He kneeled on it, chilled, soaked, shivering, trying to shake himself dry. Perhaps five minutes passed. With the mist clinging close he got no drier—but at least he had his breath again and resumed his crossing. Experimentally reaching out the tip of a boot, he found another dry-topped boulder just ahead. He negotiated it. Still another was beyond it. Then came another. The going became easier—he would make it to the far side without another soaking. His pace quickened and he traversed another pair of boulders. Then, through a rift in the mist, he was granted a glimpse of the shore.

Something seemed wrong.

CAREFULLY he bent low and dipped his left hand in the water. He felt the thrust of the current coming from the right and striking his open palm. Wearily he worked out the topography of his situation several times and each time came to the same dismaying conclusion.

If I am making a northward crossing of a river that flows from west to east I should feel the current coming from my left. . .

Somehow, he realized, he had turned himself around while scrambling for purchase in the water and since then he had with great diligence been heading back toward the southern bank of the river.

His faith in his own judgment was destroyed. He was tempted to wait here, huddled on this rock, for the mist to clear before going on. Then it occurred to him that he might have to wait through the night or even longer. He also realized belatedly that he was carrying gear designed to cope with just such problems. Fumbling in his back-pack, he pulled out the small cool shaft of his compass and aimed it at the horizon, sweeping his arm in an arc that terminated where the compass emitted its

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north-indicating beep. It confirmed his conclusions about the current, and he started across the river again, shortly coming to the place of the submerged stepping stones where he had fallen. This time he had no difficulties.

On the far shore he stripped and dried his clothing and himself with the lowest-power beam of his fusion torch. He spent an uncomfortable night huddled under a bush.

The next day was warmer and less misty. All went well, and he was able to cope with the occasional streams or rivulets that crossed his path. The land here was ridged and folded as though giant hands, one to the north and one to the south, had pushed the globe together; but as Gundersen was going down one slope and up the next, he was also gaining altitude constantly, for the entire continent sloped upward toward the mighty plateau upon which the rebirth mountain was reared.

In the early afternoon the prevailing pattern of east-west folds in the land subsided—here the landscape was skewed around so that he found himself walking parallel to a series of gentle north-south furrows, which opened into a wide circular meadow, grassy but treeless. The large animals of the north, whose names Gundersen did not know, grazed here in great snow-covered ground. There seemed to be only four or five species—something heavy-legged and hump-backed like a badly designed cow and something in the style of an oversized gazelle—there were hundreds or even thousands of each kind. Far to the east, at the very border of the plain, Gundersen saw what appeared to be a small sulidoror hunting party rounding up some of the animals.

He heard the drone of the engine again.

The beetle he had seen the other day now returned, passing quite low overhead. Instinctively Gundersen threw himself to the ground, hoping to go unnoticed. About him the animals milled uneasily, perplexed at the noise, but they did not bolt. The beetle drifted to a landing about a thousand meters north of him. He decided that Seena must have come after him, hoping to intercept him before he could submit himself to the sulidoror of the mountain of rebirth. But he was wrong. The hatch of the beetle opened and Van Beneker and his tourists began to emerge.

Gundersen wriggled forward until he was concealed behind a tall stand of thistlelike plants on a low hummock. He could not abide the thought of meeting that crew again, not at this stage in his pilgrimage, when he had been purged of so many vestiges of the Gundersen who had been.

They were walking up to the animals, photographing them, even daring to touch some of the more sluggish beasts. Gundersen heard their voices and their laughter cracking the congealed silence. Isolated words drifted randomly toward him, as meaningless as Kurtz' flow of dream-fogged gibberish. He heard, too, Van Beneker's voice cutting through the

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chatter, describing, explaining and expounding. These nine humans before him on the meadow seemed as alien to Gundersen as the sulidoror. More so, perhaps. He was aware that these last few days of mist and chill, this solitary odyssey through a world of whiteness and quiet, had worked a change in him that he barely comprehended. He felt lean of soul, stripped of the excess baggage of the spirit, a simpler man in all respects—and yet more complex.

He waited an hour or more, still hidden, while the party finished touring the meadow. Then everyone returned to the beetle. Where now? Would Van take them north to spy on the mountain of rebirth? No. No. Van Beneker wouldn't dare to trespass on that mysterious precinct.

When the beetle took off, though, it headed toward the north.

Gundersen, in his distress, shouted to it to turn back. As though heeding him, the gleaming little vehicle veered round as it gained altitude. Van Beneker must have been trying to catch a tailwind, nothing more. The beetle made for the south. The tour was over, then. Gundersen saw it pass directly above him and disappear into a lofty bank of fog. Choking with relief he rushed forward, scattering the puzzled herds with wild, loud whoops.

Now all obstacles seemed to be behind him. Gundersen crossed the valley, negotiated a snowy divide without effort, forded a shallow brook, pushed his way through a forest of short, thick, tightly-packed trees with narrow, pointed crowns. He slipped into an easy rhythm of travel, no longer paying heed to cold, mist, damp, altitude or fatigue. He was tuned to his task. When he slept he slept soundly and well. When he foraged for food to supplement his concentrates he found that which was good. When he sought to cover distance he covered it. The peace of the misty forest inspired him to prodigies.

Sometimes he saw sulidoror tracks in the thin crust of snow that covered much of the land but he met no one. The beetle did not return. Even his dreams were empty; the Kurtz-phantom that had plagued him earlier was absent now, and he dreamed only blank abstractions, forgotten by the time of awakening.

He did not know how many days had elapsed since the death of Cedric Cullen. Time had flowed and melted in upon itself. He felt no impatience, no weariness, no sense of wanting it all to be over. And so it came as a mild surprise to him when, as he began to ascend a wide, smooth, shelving ledge of stone, about thirty meters wide, bordered by a wall of icicles and decorated in places by turfs of grass and scraggly trees, he looked up and realized that he had commenced the scaling of the mountain of rebirth.

XV

FROM afar the mountain had seemed to rise dramatically

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from the misty plain in a single sweeping thrust. But now that Gundersen was actually upon its lower slopes he saw that at close range it dissolved into a series of ramps of pink stone, one atop another. He had no sense of a unified bulk. He could not even see the lofty peaks and turrets and domes that he knew must hover thousands of meters above him. A layer of clinging mist severed the mountain less than halfway up. allowing him to see only the broad, incomprehensible base.

The ascent was easy. To the right and to the left Gundersen saw sheer faces, impossible spires, fragile bridges of stone linking ledge to ledge; but there was also a switchbacking path, evidently of natural origin, that gave the patient climber access to the higher reaches. The dung of innumerable nildoror littered this long stone ramp, telling him that he must be on the right route.

Chattering munzoror leaped from ledge to ledge, or walked with soft, shuffling steps across terrifying abysses spanned by strands of vines. Goatlike beasts, white with diamond-shaped black markings, capered in graveled pockets of unreachable slopes and launched booming halloos that echoed through the afternoon.

Gundersen climbed steadily.

He wondered when some sulidor would intercept him.

This was, after all, the most sacred spot on this planet. Were there no guardians? No one to stop him, to question him, to turn him back?

He came to a place about two hours' climb up the mountainside where the upward slope diminished and the ramp became a long horizontal promenade, curving off to the right and vanishing beyond the mass of the mountain. As Gundersen followed it, three sulidoror appeared, coming around the bend. They glanced briefly at him and went past, taking no other notice, as though it were quite ordinary that an Earthman should be going up the mountain of rebirth.

After a while the ramp turned upward again. Now an overhanging stone ledge formed a partial roof for the path but it was no shelter, for the little cackling wizen-faced munzoror nested up there, dropping down pebbles and bits of chaff and worse things. Monkeys? Rodents? They dangled by their prehensile tails, twitched their long tufted ears, spat and laughed. What were they saying? "Go away, Earthman, this is no shrine of yours!" Was that it? How about, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!"

He camped for the night beneath that ledge. Munzoror several times scrambled across his face. Once he awoke to what sounded like the sobbing of a woman, deep and intense, in the abyss below. He went to the edge and found a bitter snowstorm raging. Soaring through the storm, rising and sinking, rising and sinking, were sleek, batlike things of the upper reaches, with tubular black bodies and great rubbery yellow wings. They went down until they were lost to his sight and sped upward again toward their eyries, clasping chunks

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of raw meat in sharp red beaks. He did not hear the sobbing again. When sleep returned he lay as if drugged until a brilliant dawn crashed like thunder against the side of the mountain.

HE BATHED in an ice-rimmed stream that sped down a smooth gully and intersected the path. Then he headed upward and, in the third hour of his morning's stint, overtook a party of nildoror plodding toward rebirth. They were not green but pinkish gray, the coloration marking them as members of the kindred race, the nildoror of the eastern hemisphere. He counted five of them moving slowly and with extreme effort. Their hides were cracked and ridged and their trunks—thicker and longer than those of western nildoror—drooped limply. Just to look at them wearied him. They had good reason to be tired, though—since nildoror had no way of crossing the ocean they must have taken the land route, the terrible northeastward journey across the dry bed of the Sea of Dust. Occasionally, during his tour of duty there, Gundersen had seen eastern nildoror dragging themselves through that crystalline wasteland and at last he understood what their destination had been.

"Joy of your rebirth," he called to them as he passed, using the terse eastern inflection.

"Peace be on your journey," one of the nildoror replied calmly.

They, too, saw nothing amiss in presence here. But he did. He could not avoid thinking of himself as an intruder, an interloper. Instinctively he began to lurk and skulk, keeping to the inside of the path as though that made him less conspicuous. He anticipated his rejection at any moment by some custodian of the mountain, stepping forth suddenly to block his climb.

Above him, another two or three spirals of the path overhead, he spied a scene of activity.

Two nildoror and perhaps a dozen sulidoror were in view up there, standing at the entrance to some dark chasm in the mountainside. He could see them only by taking up a precarious position at the rim of the path. A third nildor emerged from the cavern; several sulidoror went in. Some waystation, maybe, on the road to rebirth? He craned his neck to see but as he continued along his path he reached a point from which that upper level was no longer visible.

It took him longer than he expected to reach it. The switchback path looped out far to one side in order to encircle a narrow jutting spiky tower of rock sprouting from the great mountain's flank and the detour proved to be lengthy. It carried Gundersen well around to the northeastern face. By the time he was able to see the level of the chasm again a sullen twilight was falling and the place he sought was still somewhere above him.

Full darkness came before he was on its level. A heavy blanket of fog sat close upon the scene. He was perhaps midway up the peak. Here the path spread into the

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mountain's face, creating a wide plaza covered with brittle flakes of pale red stone. Against the vaulting wall of the mountain Gundersen saw a black slash, a huge inverted V, the opening of what must be a mighty cavern. Three nildoror lay sleeping to the left of this entrance and five sulidoror, to its right, seemed to be conferring.

He hung back, posting himself behind a convenient boulder and allowing himself wary peeps at the mouth of the cavern. The sulidoror went within and for more than an hour nothing happened. Then he saw them emerge, awaken one of the nildoror and lead it inside. Another hour passed before they came back for the second. After a while they fetched the third. Now the night was well advanced. The mist approached and clung. The big-beaked bat creatures, like marionettes on strings, swooped down from higher zones of the mountain, shrieking past and vanishing in the drifting fog below, returning moments later in equally swift ascent. Gundersen was alone. This was his moment to peer into the cavern but he could not bring himself to make the inspection. He hesitated, shivering, unable to go forward. His lungs were choked with mist. He could see nothing in any direction now—even the bat beasts were invisible, mere dopplering blurts of sound as they rose and fell. He struggled to recapture some of the jauntiness he had felt on that first day after Cullen's death, setting out unaccompanied through this wintry land.

He went up to the cavern.

He saw only darkness. Neither sulidoror nor nildoror were evident at the entrance. He took a cautious step. The cavern was cool but its coolness was dry and far more agreeable than the mist-sodden chill outside. Drawing his fusion torch he risked a quick flash of light and discovered that he stood in the center of an immense chamber, the lofty ceiling of which was lost in the shadows overhead. The walls of the chamber were a baroque fantasy of folds and billows, buttresses, fringes and towers, all of stone, polished and translucent, gleaming like convoluted glass during the instant the light was upon them. Straight ahead, flanked by two rippling wings of stone that were parted like frozen curtains, lay a passageway.

He went toward it.

Two more brief flashes from the torch got him to it. Then he proceeded by touch, gripping one side of the opening and feeling his way into its depths. The corridor bent sharply to the left, and, about twenty paces farther on, angled just as sharply the other way. As Gundersen came around the second bend a dim light greeted him. Here a pale green fungoid growth lining the ceiling afforded a minimal sort of illumination. He felt relieved and yet suddenly vulnerable, for, while he now could see, he could also be seen.

THE corridor was about twice a nildor's width and three times a nildor's height, rising to the peaked vault in which the fun-

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goids dwelled. It stretched for what seemed an infinite distance into the mountain. Branching off it on both sides, Gundersen saw, were secondary chambers and passages.

He advanced and peered into the nearest chamber.

It held something that was large and strange and apparently alive. On the floor of a bare stone cell lay a mass of pink flesh, shapeless and still. Gundersen made out short thick limbs and a tail curled tightly over broad flanks. He could not see the creature's head or any distinguishing marks by which he could associate it with a species he knew. It might have been a nildor but it did not seem quite large enough. As he watched it swelled with the intake of a breath and slowly subsided. Many minutes passed before it took another breath.

Gundersen moved on.

In the next cell he found a similar sleeping mound of unidentifiable flesh. In the third cell lay another. The fourth cell, on the opposite side of the corridor, contained a nildor of the western species, also in deep slumber. The cell beside it was occupied by a sulidor lying oddly on its back, its limbs poking rigidly upward. The next cell held a sulidor in the same position but otherwise quite startlingly different, for it had shed its whole thick coat of fur and lay naked, revealing awesome muscles beneath a gray, slick-looking skin. Continuing, Gundersen came to a chamber that housed something even more bizarre—a figure that had a nildor's spines, tusks and trunk but a sulidor's powerful arms and legs and a sulidor's frame. What nightmare composite was this? Gundersen stood awed before it for a long while, trying to comprehend how the head of a nildor might have been joined to the body of a sulidor. He realized that no such joining could have occured. The sleeper here simply partook of the characteristics of both races in a single body. A hybrid? A genetic mingling?

He did not know. But he knew now that this was no mere waystation on the road toward rebirth. This was the place of rebirth itself.

Far ahead, figures emerged from one of the subsidiary corridors and crossed the main chamber—two sulidoror and a nildor. Gundersen pressed himself against the wall and remained motionless until they were out of sight. Then he continued inward.

He saw nothing but miracles. He was in a garden of fantasies where no natural barriers held.

Here was a round spongy mass of soft pink flesh with just one recognizable feature sprouting from it—a sulidor's huge tail.

Here was a sulidor, bereft of fur, whose arms were foreshortened and pillar-like, like the limbs of a nildor, and whose body had grown round and heavy and thick.

Here was a sulidor in full fur with a nildor's trunk and ears.

Here was raw meat that was neither nildor nor sulidor but alive and passive, a mere thing awaiting a sculptor's shaping hand.

Here was another thing that resembled a sulidor, bones melted.

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Here was still another thing that resembled a nildor who had never had bones.

Here were trunks, spines, tusks, fangs, claws, tails, paws. Here was fur and here smooth hide. Here was flesh flowing at will and seeking new shapes. Here were dark chambers, lit only by flickering fungoid-glow, in which no firm distinction of species existed.

BIOLOGY'S laws seemed suspended here. This was no trifling gene-tickling that he saw, Gundersen knew. On Earth any skilled helix-parlor technician could redesign an organism's geneplasm with some cunning thrusts of a needle and a few short spurts of drugs; he could make a camel bring forth a hippopotamus, a cat bring forth a chipmunk or, for that matter, a woman bring forth a sulidor. One merely enhanced the desired characteristics within sperm and ovum and suppressed other characteristics until one had a reasonable facsimile of the creature to be reproduced. The basic genetic building-blocks were the same for every life form; by rearranging them, one could create any kind of strange and monstrous progeny. But that was not what was being done here.

On Earth, Gundersen knew, it was also possible to persuade any living cell to play the part of a fertilized egg and divide, grow and yield a full organism. The venom from Belzagor was one catalyst for that process; there were others. And, so one could induce the stump of a man's arm to regrow that arm; one could scrape a bit of skin from a frog and generate an army of frogs with it; one could even rebuild an entire human being from the shards of his own ruined body. But that was not what was being done here.

What was being done here, Gundersen realized, was a transmutation of species, a change worked not upon ova but upon adult organisms. Now he understood Nasinisul's remark, when asked if sulidoror also underwent rebirth: *If there were no day, could there be night?* Yes. Nildor into sulidor. Sulidor into nildor. Gundersen shivered in shock. He was plunged into a universe without fixed points. What was real? What was enduring?

He comprehended now what had happened to Kurtz in this mountain.

Gundersen stumbled into a cell in which a creature lay midway in its metamorphosis. Smaller than a nildor, larger than a sulidor; fangs, not tusks; trunk, not snout; fur, not hide; flat footpads, not claws; body shaped for walking upright.

"Who are you?" Gundersen whispered. "What are you? What were you? Which way are you heading?"

Rebirth. Cycle upon cycle upon cycle. Nildoror bound upon a northward pilgrimage, entering these caves, becoming—sulidoror?

If this is true, Gundersen thought, *then we have never really known anything about this planet. And this is true.*

He ran wildly from cell to cell, no longer caring whether he might

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be discovered. Each cell confirmed his guess. He saw nildoror and sulidoror in every stage of metamorphosis, some almost wholly nildoror, some unmistakably sulidoror, but most of them occupying intermediate positions along that journey from pole to pole; more than half were so deep in transformation that it was impossible for him to tell which way they were heading. All slept. Before his eyes flesh flowed but nothing moved. In these cool shadowy chambers change came as a dream.

Gundersen reached the end of the corridor. He pressed his palms against cold, unyielding stone. Breathless, sweat-drenched, he turned toward the last chamber in the series and plunged into it.

WITHIN was a sulidor not yet asleep, standing over three of the sluggish serpents of the tropics, which moved in gentle coils about him. The sulidor was huge, age-grizzled, a being of unusual presence and dignity.

"Na-sinisul?" Gundersen asked.

"We knew that in time you must come here, Edmundgundersen."

"I never imagined—I didn't understand—" Gundersen paused, struggling to regain control. More quietly he said, "Forgive me if I have intruded. Have I interrupted your rebirth's beginning?"

"I have several days yet," the sulidor said. "I merely prepare the chamber now."

"And you'll come forth from it as a nildor."

"Yes," said Na-sinisul.

"Life goes in a cycle here, then? Sulidor to nildor to sulidor to nildor to—"

"Yes. Over and over, rebirth after rebirth."

"All nildoror spend part of their lives as sulidoror? All sulidoror spend part of there lives as nildoror?"

"Yes. All."

How had it begun, Gundersen wondered? How had the destinies of these two so different races become entangled? How had an entire species consented to undergo such a metamorphosis? He knew now why he had never seen an infant nildor or sulidor. He said, "Are young ones of either race ever born on this world?"

"Only when needed as replacements for those who can be reborn no more. It is not often. Our population is stable."

"Stable, yet constantly changing."

"Through a predictable pattern of change," said Na-sinisul. "When I emerge I will be Fi'gontor of the ninth birth. My people have waited for thirty turnings for me to rejoin them but circumstances required me to remain this long in the forests of the mists."

"Is nine rebirths unusual?"

"There are those among us who have been here fifteen times. There are some who wait a hundred turnings to be called once. The summons comes when the summons comes—and for those who merit it, life will have no end."

"No—end—"

"Why should it?" Na-sinisul asked. "In this mountain we are purged of the poisons of age and

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elsewhere we purge ourselves of the poisons of sin."

"On the central plateau, that is."

"I see you have spoken with the man Cullen."

"Yes," Gundersen said. "Just before his—death."

"I knew also that his life was over," said Na-sinisul. "We learn things swiftly here."

Gundersen said, "Where are Srin'gahar and Luu'khamin and the others I traveled with?"

"The are here, in cells not far away."

"Already in rebirth?"

"For some days now. They will be sulidoror soon and will live in the north until they are summoned to assume the nildor form again. Thus we refresh our souls by undertaking new lives."

"During the sulidor phase—do you keep a memory of your past life as a nildor?"

"Certainly. How can experience be valuable if it is not retained? We accumulate wisdom. Our grasp of truth is heightened by seeing the universe now through a nildor's eyes, not through a sulidor's. Not in body alone are the two forms different. To undergo rebirth is to enter a new world, not merely a new life."

Hesitantly Gundersen said, "And when someone who is not of this planet undergoes rebirth? What effect is there? What kind of changes happen?"

"You saw Kurtz."

"I saw Kurtz," said Gundersen. "But I have no idea what Kurtz has become."

"Kurtz has become Kurtz," the sulidor said. "For your kind there can be no true transformation, because you have no complementary species. You change, yes, but you become only what you have the potential to become. You liberate such forces as already exist within you. While he slept, Kurtz chose his new form himself. No one else designed it for him. It is not easy to explain this with words, Edmundgundersen."

"If I underwent rebirth, then, I wouldn't necessarily turn into something like Kurtz?"

"Not unless your soul is as Kurtz' soul and that is not possible."

"What would I become?"

"No one may know these things before the fact. If you wish to discover what rebirth will do to you—you must accept rebirth."

"If I asked for rebirth would I be permitted to have it?"

"I told you when we first met," said Na-sinisul, "that no one on this world will prevent you from doing anything. You were not stopped as you ascended the mountain of rebirth. You were not stopped when you explored these chambers. Rebirth will not be denied you if you feel you need to experience it."

Easily, serenely, instantly, Gundersen said, "Then I ask for rebirth."

XVI

Silently, unsurprised, Na-sinisul leads him to a vacant cell and gestures to him to remove his clothing. Gundersen strips. His fingers

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fumble only slightly with the snaps and catches. At the sulidor's direction Gundersen lies on the floor, as all other candidates for rebirth have done. The stone is so cold that he hisses when his bare skin touches it. Na-sinisul goes out. Gundersen looks up at the glowing fungoids in the distant vault of the ceiling. The chamber is large enough to hold a nildor comfortably—to Gundersen on the floor, it seems immense.

Na-sinisul returns, bearing a bowl made from a hollow log. He offers it to Gundersen. The bowl contains a pale blue fluid.

"Drink," says the sulidor softly.

Gundersen drinks.

The taste is sweet, like sugar water. This is something he has tasted before and he knows when it was: at the serpent station, years ago. It is the forbidden venom. He drains the bowl and Na-sinisul leaves him.

Two sulidoror whom Gundersen does not know enter the cell. They kneel on either side of him and begin a low, mumbling chant, some sort of ritual. He cannot understand any of it. They knead and stroke his body—their hands, with the fearful claws retracted, are strangely soft, like the pads of a cat. He is tense but the tension ebbs. He feels the drug taking effect now—a thickness at the back of his head, a tightness in his chest, a blurring of his vision. Na-sinisul is in the room again, although Gundersen did not see him enter. He carries a bowl.

"Drink," he says and Gundersen drinks.

It is another fluid entirely—or perhaps a different distillate of the venom. Its flavor is bitter, with undertastes of smoke and ash. He has to force himself to get to the bottom of the bowl but Na-sinisul waits, silently insistent, for him to finish it. Again the old sulidor leaves. At the mouth of the cell he turns and says something to Gundersen but the words are overgrown with heavy blue fur and will not enter Gundersen's ears.

"What did you say?" the Earthman asks. "What? What?"

His words sprout leaden weights, teardrop-shaped, somber. They fall at once to the floor and shatter. One of the chanting sulidoror sweeps the broken words into a corner with a quick motion of his tail.

Gundersen hears a trickling sound, a glittering spiral of noise, as of water running into his cell. His eyes are closed but he feels the wetness swirling about him. It is not water, though. It has a more solid texture. A sort of gelatin, perhaps. Lying on his back he is several centimeters deep in it and the level is rising. It is cool but not cold and it insulates him nicely from the chill rock of the floor. He is aware of the faint pink odor of the inflowing gelatin, and of its firm consistency, like the tones of a bassoon in its deepest register. The sulidoror continue to chant. He feels a tube sliding into his mouth, a sleek piccolo-shriek of a tube, and through its narrow core drips yet another substance, thick oily, emitting the sound of muted kettledrums as it hits his palate.

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Now the gelatin has reached the lower curve of his jaw. He welcomes its advance. It laps gently at his chin. The tube is withdrawn from his mouth just as the flow of gelatin covers his lips.

Will I be able to breathe?

A sulidor answers him in cryptic Sumerian phrases, and Gundersen is reassured.

He is wholly sealed in the gelatin. It covers the floor of the chamber to a depth of one meter. Light dimly penetrates it. Gundersen knows that its upper surface is smooth and flawless, forming a perfect seal where it touches the walls of the cell. Now he has become a chrysalis. He will be given nothing more to drink. He will lie here and he will be reborn.

One must die in order that one may be reborn, he knows.

DEATH comes to him and enfolds him. Gently he slides into a dark abyss. The embrace of death is tender. Gundersen floats through a realm of trembling emptiness. He hovers suspended in the black void. Bands of scarlet and purple light transfix him, buffeting him like bars of metal. He tumbles. He spins. He soars.

He encounters death once more and they wrestle and he is defeated by death. His body is shivered into splinters and a shower of bright Gundersen-fragments scatters through space.

The fragments seek one another. They solemnly circle one another. They dance. They unite. They take on the form of Edmund Gundersen, but this new Gundersen glows like pure, transparent glass. He is glistening, a transparent man through whom the light of the great sun at the core of the universe passes without resistance. A spectrum spreads forth from his chest. The brilliance of his body illuminates the galaxies.

Strands of color emanate from him and link him to all who possess *g'rakh* in the universe.

He partakes of the biological wisdom of the cosmos.

He tunes his soul to the essence of what is and what must be.

He is without limits. He can reach out and touch any soul. He reaches toward the soul of Na-sin-isul and the sulidor greets him and admits him. He reaches toward Srin'gahar, toward Vol'himyor the many-born, toward Luu'khamin, Se-holomir, Yi-gartigok, toward the nildoror and sulidoror who lie in the caves of metamorphosis and toward the dwellers in the misty forests and toward the dwellers in the steaming jungles and toward those who dance and rage in the forlorn plateau and to all others of Belzagor who share in *g'rakh*.

And he comes now to one that is neither nildor nor sulidor, a sleeping soul, a veiled soul, a soul of a color and timber and a texture unlike the others. It is an Earthborn soul, the soul of Seena, and he calls softly to her, saying, *Awaken, awaken, I love you, I have come for you.* She does not awaken. He calls to her, *I am new, I am reborn, I overflow with love. Join me. Become part of me. Seena? Seena? Seena?* And she does not respond.

He sees the souls of the other

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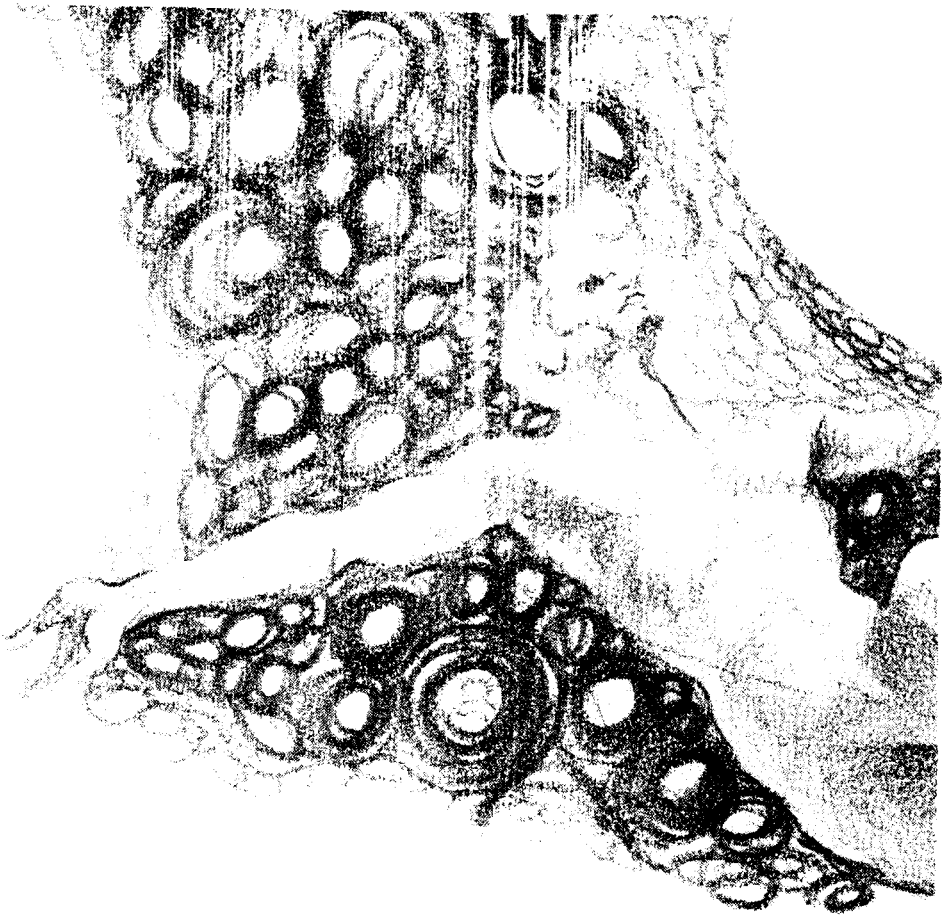

Earthmen now. They have *g'rakh* but rationality is not enough—their souls are blind and silent. Here is Van Beneker; here are the tourists; here are the lonely keepers of solitary outposts in the jungle. Here is the charred gray emptiness where the soul of Cedric Cullen belongs.

He cannot reach any of them.

He moves on, and a new soul gleams beyond the mist. It is the soul of Kurtz. Kurtz comes to him or he goes to Kurtz and Kurtz is not asleep.

Now you are among us, Kurtz says and Gundersen says, *Yes, here I am at last.* Soul opens to soul and Gundersen looks down into the darkness that is Kurtz, past the pearl-gray curtain that shrouds his spirit, into a place of

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terror where black figures shuttle with many legs along ridged webs. Chaotic forms cohere, expand, dissolve within Kurtz. Gundersen looks beyond this dark and dismal zone. Beyond it he finds a cold, hard, bright light shining whitely out of the deepest place and Kurtz says, *See? Do you see? Am I a monster? I have goodness within me.*

You are not a monster, Gundersen says.

But I have suffered, says Kurtz.

For your sins, Gundersen says.

I have paid for my sins with my suffering and I should now be released.

You have suffered, Gundersen agrees.

When will my suffering end, then?

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Gundersen replies that he does not know, that it is not he who sets the limits of such things.

Kurtz says, *I knew you. Nice young fellow, a little slow. Seena speaks highly of you. Sometimes she wishes things had worked out better for you and her. Instead she got me. Here I lie. Here lie we. Why won't you release me?*

What can I do, asks Gundersen?

Let me come back to the mountain. Let me finish my rebirth.

Gundersen does not know how to respond. He seeks along the circuit of *g'rakh*, consulting Na-sinisul, consulting Vol'himyor, consulting all the many-born ones and they join, they join, they speak with one voice, they tell Gundersen in a voice of thunder that Kurtz is finished, his rebirth is over, he may not come back to the mountain.

Gundersen repeats this to Kurtz but Kurtz has already heard. Kurtz shrivels. Kurtz shrinks back into darkness. He comes enmeshed in his own webs.

Pity me, he calls out to Gundersen across a vast gulf. *Pity me, for this is hell and I am in it.*

Gundersen says, *I pity you. I pity you. I pity you. I pity you.*

THE echo of his own voice diminishes to infinity. All is silent. Out of the void, suddenly, comes Kurtz' wordless reply, a shrill and deafening crescendo blast of rage and hatred and malevolence, the scream of a flawed Prometheus flailing at the beak that pierces him. The shriek reaches a climax of shattering intensity. It dies away. The shivering fabric of the universe grows still again. A soft violet light appears, absorbing the lingering disharmonies of that one terrible outcry.

Gundersen weeps for Kurtz.

The cosmos streams with shining tears and on that salty river Gundersen floats, traveling without will, visiting this world and that, drifting among the nebulae, passing through clouds of cosmic dust, soaring over strange suns.

He is not alone. Na-sinisul is with him and Srin'gahar—and Vol'himyor and all the others.

He becomes aware of the harmony of all things *g'rakh*. He sees for the first time the bonds that bind *g'rakh* to *g'rakh*. He who lies in rebirth is in contact with them all but also they are each in contact with one another at any time, at every time, every soul on the planet joined in wordless communication.

He sees the unity of all *g'rakh* and it awes and humbles him.

He perceives the complexity of this double people, the rhythm of its existence, the unending and infinite swing of cycle upon cycle of rebirth and new creation, above all the union, the oneness. He perceives his own monstrous isolation, the walls that cut him off from other men, that cut off man from man, each a prisoner in his own skull. He sees what it is like to live among people who have learned to liberate the prisoner in the skull.

That knowledge dwindles and crushes him. He thinks, *We made them slaves, we called them beasts and all the time they were linked,*

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they spoke in their minds without words, they transmitted the music of the soul one to one to one. We were alone and they were not and instead of kneeling before them and begging to share the miracle we gave them work to do.

Gundersen weeps for Gundersen.

Na-sinisul says, *This is no time for sorrow* and Srin'gahar says, *The past is past.* Vol'himyor says, *Through remorse you are redeemed.* And all of them speak with one voice and at one time and he understands. He understands.

Now Gundersen understands all.

He knows that nildor and sulidor are not two separate species but merely forms of the same creature, no more different than caterpillar and butterfly. He is aware of how it was for the nildoror when they were still in their primeval state, when they were born as nildoror and died helplessly as nildoror, perishing when the inevitable decay of their souls came upon them. And he knows the fear and the ecstasy of those first few nildoror who accepted the serpent's temptation and drank the drug of liberation and became things with fur and claws, misshapen, malformed, transmuted. And he knows their pain as they were driven out, even into the plateau where no being possessing *g'rakh* would venture.

And he knows their sufferings in that plateau.

And he knows the triumph of those first sulidoror, who, surmounting their isolation, returned from the wilderness bearing a new creed. Come and be changed, come and be changed! Give up this flesh for another! Graze no more but hunt and eat flesh! Be reborn and live again and conquer the brooding body that drags the spirit to destruction!

And he sees the nildoror accepting their destiny and giving themselves up joyfully to rebirth—a few and then more and then more. And then whole encampments, entire populations, going forth, not to hide in the plateau of purification but to live in the new way, in the land where mist rules. They cannot resist because with the change of body comes the blessed liberation of soul, the unity, the bond of *g'rakh* to *g'rakh*.

HE UNDERSTANDS now how it was for these people when the Earthmen came, the eager, busy, ignorant, pitiful, short-lived Earthmen, who were beings of *g'rakh* yet could not or would not enter into the oneness, who dabbled with the drug of liberation and did not taste it to the fullest, whose minds were sealed one against the other, whose roads and buildings and pavements spread like pockmarks over the tender land. He sees how little the Earthmen knew and how little they were capable of learning—and how much was kept from them since they would misunderstand it—and why it was necessary for the sulidoror to hide in the mists all these years of occupation, giving no clue to the strangers that they might be related to the nildoror, that they were the sons of the nildoror and the fathers of the

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nildoror as well. For if the Earthmen had known even half the truth they would have recoiled in fright, since their minds are sealed one against the other and they would not have it any other way, except for the few who dared to learn—and too many of those were dark and demon-ridden, like Kurtz.

He feels vast relief that the time of pretending is over on this world and that nothing need be hidden any longer, that sulidoror may go down into the lands of the nildoror and move freely about without fear that the secret and the mystery of rebirth may accidentally be revealed to those who could not withstand such knowledge.

He knows joy that he has come here and survived the test and endured his liberation. His mind is open, now, and he has been reborn.

He descends, rejoining his body. He is aware once more that he lies embedded in congealed gelatin on the cold floor of a dark cell abutting a lengthy corridor within a rose-red mountain wreathed in white mist on a strange world. He does not rise. His time has not yet come.

He yields to the tones and colors and odors and textures that flood the universe. He allows them to carry him back and he floats easily along the time-line, so that now he is a child peering at the shield of night and trying to count the stars; and now he is timidly sipping raw venom with Kurtz and Salamone; and now he enrolls in the Company and tells a personnel computer that his strongest wish is to foster the expansion of the human empire; and now he grasps Seena on a tropic beach under the light of several moons; and now he meets her for the first time; and now he sifts crystals in the Sea of Dust; and now he mounts a nildor; and now he runs laughing down a childhood street; and now he turns his torch on Cedric Cullen; and now he climbs the rebirth mountain; and now he trembles as Kurtz walks into a room; and now he takes the wafer on his tongue; and now he stares at the wonder of a white breast filling his cupped hand; and now he steps forth into mottled, alien sunlight; and now he crouches over Henry Dykstra's swollen body and now and now and now and now

He hears the tolling of mighty bells.

He feels the planet shuddering and shifting on its axis.

He smells dancing tongues of flame.

He touches the roots of the rebirth mountain.

He feels the souls of nildoror and sulidoror all about him.

He recognizes the words of the hymn the sulidoror sing and he sings with them.

He grows. He shrinks. He burns. He shivers. He changes.

He awakens.

"Yes," says a thick, low voice. "Come out of it now. The time is here. Sit up. Sit up."

Gundersen's eyes open. Colors surge through his dazzled brain. It is a moment before he is able to see.

A sulidor stands at the entrance to his cell.

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"I am Ti-munilee," the sulidor says, "You are born again."

"I know you," Gundersen says. "But not by that name. Who are you?"

"Reach out to me and see," says the sulidor.

Gundersen reaches out.

"I knew you as the nildor Srin-'gahar," Gundersen says.

XVII

LEANING on the sulidor's arm, Gundersen walked unsteadily out of the chamber of rebirth.

In the dark corridor he asked, "Have I been changed?"

"Yes, very much," Ti-munilee said.

"How? In what way?"

"You do not know?"

Gundersen held a hand before his eyes. Five fingers, yes, as before. He looked down at his naked body and saw no difference in it. Obscurely he experienced disappointment; perhaps nothing had really happened in that chamber. His legs, his feet, his loins, his belly—everything as it had been.

"I haven't changed at all," he said.

"You have changed greatly," the sulidor replied.

"I see myself and I see the same body as before."

"Look again," advised Ti-munilee.

In the main corridor Gundersen caught sight of himself dimly reflected in the sleek glassy walls by the light of the glowing fungoids. He drew back, startled. He had changed, yes; he had outkurtzed

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This month, the Berkley Travel Service offers a variety of trips (all good), from that venerable fantastic voyage in itself, THE WORLD OF NULL-A, to a hair-raising trek through Old Lemuria with the mighty-thewed Valkarthian in THONGOR AND THE DRAGON CITY. Or, if you fancy it, a swing through the Goober Cluster with RETIEF AND THE WARLORDS.

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Kurtz in his rebirth. What peered back at him from the rippling sheen of the walls was scarcely human. Gundersen stared at the masklike face with hooded slots for eyes, at the slitted nose, the gill-pouches trailing to his shoulders, the many-jointed arms, the row of sensors on his chest, the grasping organs at the hips, the cratered skin, the glow-organs in the cheeks. He looked down again at himself and saw none of those things. Which was the illusion?

He hurried toward daylight.

"Have I changed or have I not changed?" he asked the sulidor.

"You have changed."

"Where?"

"The changes are within," said the former Srin'gahar.

"And the reflection?"

"Reflections sometimes lie. Look at yourself through my eyes and see what you are."

Gundersen reached forth again. He saw himself and it was his old body he saw—and then he flickered and underwent a phase-shift and he beheld the being with sensors and slots. And then he was himself again.

"Are you satisfied?" Ti-munilee asked.

"Yes," said Gundersen.

He walked slowly toward the lip of the plaza outside the mouth of the cavern. The seasons had changed since he had entered that cavern—now an iron winter was on the land. The mist was piled deep in the valley and where it broke he saw the heavy mounds of snow and ice. He felt the presence of nildoror and sulidoror about him, though he saw only Ti-munilee. He was aware of the soul of old Na-sinisul within the mountain, passing through the final phases of rebirth. He touched the soul of Vol'himyor far to the south. He brushed lightly over the soul of tortured Kurtz. He sensed suddenly, startlingly, other Earthborn souls as free as his, open to him, hovering nearby.

"Who are you?" he asked.

And they answered, "You are not the first of your kind to come through rebirth intact."

Yes. He remembered. Cullen had said that there had been others, some transformed into monsters, others simply never heard from again.

"Where are you?" he asked them.

They told him but he did not understand, for what they said was that they had left their bodies behind.

"Have I also left my body behind?" he asked.

And they said, no, he was still wearing his flesh, for so he had chosen. They had chosen otherwise. Then they withdrew from him.

"Do you feel the changes?" Ti-munilee asked.

"The changes are within me."

"Yes. Now you are at peace."

And, surprised by joy, he realized that that was so. The fears, the conflicts, the tensions, were gone. Guilt was gone. Sorrow was gone. Loneliness was gone.

Ti-munilee said, "Do you know who I was when I was Srin'gahar? Reach toward me."

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Gundersen reached. He said, in a moment, "You were one of those seven nildoror whom I would not allow to go to their rebirths many years ago."

"Yes."

"And yet you carried me on your back all the way to the mist country."

"My time had come again," said Ti-munilee, "and I was happy. I forgave you. Do you remember, when we crossed into the mist country, there was an angry sulidor at the border?"

"Yes," Gundersen said.

"He was another of the seven. He was the one you touched with your torch. He had had his rebirth finally and still he hated you. Now he no longer does. Tomorrow, when you are ready, reach toward him and he will forgive you. Will you do that?"

"I will," said Gundersen. "But will he really forgive?"

"You are reborn. Why should he not forgive?" Ti-munilee said. Then the sulidor asked, "Where will you go now?"

"South. To help my people. First to help Kurtz, to guide him through a new rebirth. Then the others. Those who are willing to be opened."

"May I share your journey?"

"You know that answer."

Far off the dark soul of Kurtz stirred and throbbed.

Wait, Gundersen told it. *Wait. You will not suffer much longer.*

A blast of cold wind struck the mountainside. Sparkling flakes of snow whirled into Gundersen's face. He smiled. He had never felt so free, so light, so young. A vision of a mankind transformed blazed within him.

I am the emissary, he thought. *I am the bridge over which they shall cross. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the light of the world—he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life. A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another.*

He said to Ti-munilee, "Shall we go now?"

"I am ready when you are ready."

"Now."

"Now," said the sulidor and together they began to descend the windswept mountain. ★

In this month's IF

SOS

by Poul Anderson

". . .nobody really knows why men go to war. Now I suggest that there is no such thing as *the* reason. . . ." *Poul Anderson*

DON'T MISS THIS GREAT STORY OF MAN'S FIGHT FOR THE MOON

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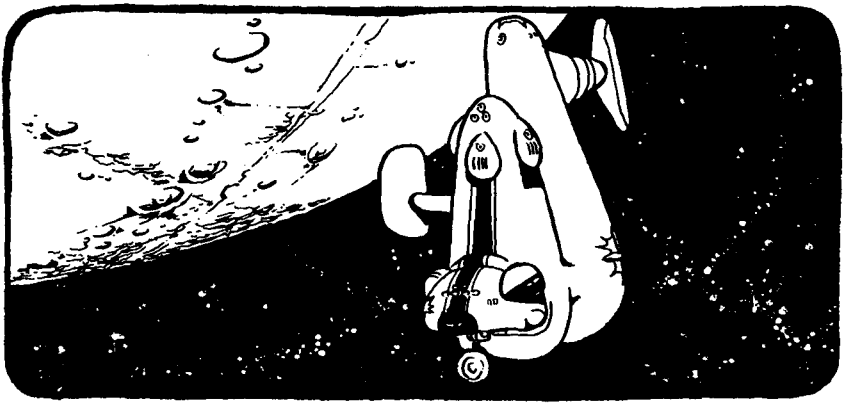
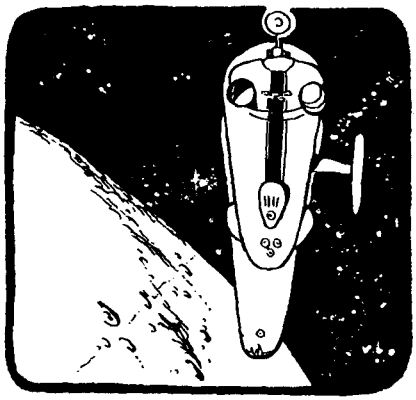
SUNPOT

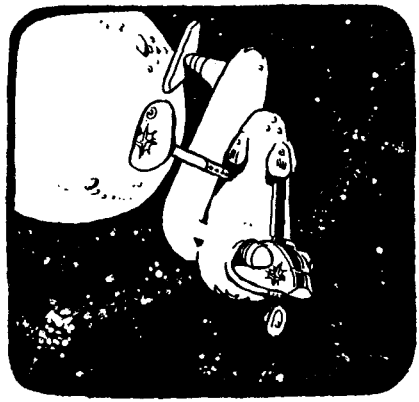
by VAUGHN BODE ©1970 by VF BODE

THE GIANT SUNPOT COMPLEX HANGS HIGH ABOVE THE RUSSIAN SIDE OF THE MOON... IT HANGS LIKE A BLOATED SIAMESE BOWLING PIN IN THE AFTERNOON MOTIONLESSNESS OF SPACE...



BECAUSE OF THE CERTAIN DANGER OF DISCOVERY BY THE APOLLO MOON SHIP, DR. ELECTRIC ELECTS TO MOVE THE GREAT MASSIVE SUNPOT OVER TO THE PLANET VENUS. 3 DAYS AT DEAD SLOW INERTIAL...





THE POWER FACTORY IS WARMED UP, FUEL SCREWS ARE FED, SCREAMING, INTO THE MONO-DIRECTIONALIZED ATOMIC INERTIAL FORCE TRANSFORMERS.. SUNPOT MOVES OFF LIKE A MOULDY CREAKING PLANET...

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DR. ELECTRIC DEFENDS HIS MEAN POLICIES

DR. ELECTRIC, I STRONGLY PROTEST'S YOUR ATTEMPTS TO SHOOT DOWN THE AMERICAN APOLLO!

SHUTUP, OR I'LL HAS BELINDA BUMP SMOTHER YOU WIF HER HOT SYNTHETIC BOOBS!

YOU HAD YOUR ORIGINS IN AMERICA! HOW COULD YOU ATTEMPT SUCH AN ANTI-THING?!

ANTI-THINGS COME EASY TO ME.. BUT WE HAS SPARED DA APOLLO MOON SHIP... REMEMBERS, BOWEL MOUTH, THE ONLY REASON THEY DIDN'T SEE THE SUNPOT WAS BECAUSE THEY WAS LOOKIN' THE OTHER WAY...

AH NOW, AS YOU OBSERBS, I IS MOVING OUR PLANET, SUNPOT, TO VENUS WHERE WE'LL HANG AROUND AWHILE TO FINISH CHECKING OUT THE SUNPOT FOR DEEP SPACE.. OKAY, BELINDA, SMOTHER THE CREEP IN ECSTASY...

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THE NUTTY SCREW
YAHA! I IS ABOUT TO TAKE OVER DIS TRAVESTY OF ABORTED SCIENCE FICTION!
I'LL JUS' KILLS MYSELF ANOTHER FALSIE JUST TO PERK UP ME MARKSMANSHIP.
KUNK KUNK!
WHAT?! YARGH. ELECTRIC BEES!!
ALLRIGHT, SCREW-U-2 YOU IS A BERSERIKER, AN UNSTABLE ELEMENT IN THE SUMPOT PLANET'S STRUCTURE, GIVE UP!!
COME AN GET ME, YA' DIRTY BEESWAX STUFFIN' MOTHERS!!

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BOOM FARK KUNK WAP WAP ZA-DI-DI-DI-DIT!
IT'S GUN-GADIN AT DA ALAMO BOYS! MY HOUR OF EGO IDENTITY, MY ROLLING MOMENT OF TRUTH!
POPPING BOOM ZINGO BA-TWEE
VAUGHN BODE
PUNCH CRUSH SUNCH
ARGH THEY HAS DECIMATED ME LITTLE BOD!!
5
REPORT TO DR. ELECTRIC... WE HAVE DESTROYED THE BERSERKER SCREW AT THE PEAK OF ITS IDENTITY CRISIS...
HEY, CAN I TELL BELINDA BUMP THE SCREW SHOT HER FALSIES?...

TO BE CONTINUED

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(Continued from page 3)

noted, do subsume that narrower sort of loyalty within their larger concern.

That larger concern is what makes the crucial difference. The institution of fandom ensures that any given time, in all corners of the English-speaking world and in significant additional precincts, there will be several thousand energetic individuals who care deeply, in detail, continuously—and with positive effect—about the ultimate destiny, good and progress of science fiction.

Because they are organized—via these various clubs and national and international bodies whose regional meetings and annual conventions provide additional social links—they are in a position to lend the field a certain dignity, via awards like the Hugo and its collateral publicity. (Among such awards, the Hugo for excellence is unique. The crime field's Edgar, the western's Silver Spur and motion pictures' Oscar, like the Science Fiction Writers of America's Nebula, are all awards attained by impressing one's fellow members of a guild or "academy." The Hugo alone is awarded by the audience toward which all these excellences are presumably aimed).

But fandom, and a fannish way of life in which some would insist that the plural of fan is "fen," and some that Fandom Is Just A Goshdurn Hobby (usually neologized as "fijagh," opposed to "fiawol"), would be just another Goddamned social club if it weren't for its mailing lists.

The binding force in fandom—many of whose most active and influential members have never had eyes laid on them by more than a fraction of their peers—is the amateur publication, or fanzine (as distinguished from "prozine" —what you are reading now).

Only Sam Moskowitz knows how many fanzines there have been and not even Sam Moskowitz could tell you accurately how many are in the mail to how many readers at any given moment—just as any attempt at a fannish census would be the same as an attempt to paint all of the Golden Gate Bridge before the other end needed painting again. But there are fans of every stripe and coloration; the prozine and book collectors, something like those in the larger universe but not completely so; the conservative and radical political activists, who play out within the fannish universe those impulses toward establishmentarianism and feud which all flesh is heir to; the encyclopedists and historians; the sane and the insane, all in a jumble together—and, yes, even those who are beyond the original interest which led them to discover somehow the names of a few other fannish types and to be-

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gin their entry into an arena in which they now discuss art films, sports cars, music, politics, drugs . . . almost anything but the concern which originally brought them here.

The main concern always holds the middle, however, and in that wide, undistributed place there exist spokesmen and advocates of astonishing persuasive power, sharpening the wits of all around them, pouring out an impressive succession of opinions from which some *pro tem* consensus is always emerging—perhaps to be recorded and perhaps not before the next determination submerges it but always there to be sensed.

IT DOESN'T matter that you couldn't get two fans to agree what the fannish attitude is or that you couldn't write an accurate, thorough statement of your own. What counts is a perpetual ferment of ideas, many of them not overtly related to sf at all, many of them clouded by personal motives, some destroyed—or enhanced—by the typographical accidents inherent in home-typed stencil duplication, many of them demonstrably juvenile, because their advocates are, in the median, below draft age chronologically and glandularly, though not always intellectually—what counts, as I was saying, is that there is this wealth of effective expression. From it the individual fan extracts a resultant attitude toward sf—among other things—which, though individual and dynamic, is nevertheless in rough agreement with other attitudes and which changes slowly enough so that there are such things as "*a* fannish attitude," and certain enduring institutions in the form of shibboleth.

What does this mean to Thee and Me? It means Somebody Cares—and has been caring long enough to establish a weight of tradition and a culture from which a given individual might emerge toward other activities but which would remain inherent in his intellectual bones. Fandom may or may not be A conscious Way Of Life, but fanac leaves its mark. And thus it affects Thee and Me quite strongly, though Thee mightn't know who 4sJ might be or the Futurians were and Me might be a decade or three beyond trotting all 26 copies of the latest issue of *Slantasy* down to the post office in Dorothy, N.J. Because they do grow up, you know, or at least get older—or did you think science-fiction writers grow on trees?

But we can return to this subject another time. Meanwhile, here's a fannish publication that's not a fanzine:

The Index of Science Fiction Magazines 1951-1965, compiled by Norman Metcalf, is a neatly printed and semi-permanently bound 8 1/2 by 11 volume avail-

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able from J. Ben Stark, P.O. Box 261, Fairmont Station, El Cerrito, California 94530. Unfortunately, nothing on the book indicates its price. Whatever it costs, it's a good thing.

Obviously designed to be a companion volume to Don Day's *Index to Science Fiction Magazines 1926-1950*, this one follows the same page makeup style and will fit very comfortably on the shelf right beside its predecessor. In fact it contains a halfway decent section of errata on the Day *Index*.

Some of you out there will have automatically greeted the news of this volume's appearance with joy —those being the serious collectors and students of science fiction, for whom the Day *Index* served as the first really good chart into a major portion of the hitherto unsystematized past. Metcalf, Stark, et. al., have done a generous service to many of us by bringing this one out—and even more and especially so because they made it conform to the Day.

There are joys beyond collecting, however, and some beyond description. This book has values even for you who don't really care exactly how long Darius John Granger's story *Stop! You're Killing Me!* may have been, or in precisely which issue of the 1956 *Imagination* it appeared. Many of you will join in not caring very much who *Imagination's* routine writers were. But reading through this book arouses a fascination beyond any purely denotative value. The medium itself conveys many overriding messages, their number and content limited only by the nooks and crannies in one's own mind.

For example, it's kind of gratifying to discover that Fred McMorrow had a story in the May, 1960, *F & SF*. I've only read one McMorrow story—a pretty good one from the earlier days of *Playboy*. I've got a May 1960 *F & SF* kicking around the house. One of these days very soon I'm going to have the pleasure of reading the McMorrow story in it, and if he's up to the standard of the one example I know, I might well consider that this alone was worth the price of admission to the *Index* —even considering that I don't know the price. If you follow me.

Or on another hand, one of my favorite pieces of fun in this book, as with the Day, is simply reading down the title index.

For instance, in the period covered by this index there have been three stories published in various places all called *Breakdown*, not one of them particularly distinguished. There have been four called *Breaking Point*, none of them particularly distinguished. However, there has been only one story called *The Belly of GorJeetl* —and it wasn't any good either.

The series I like begins with *Call Her Satan* by a house name for

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Fantastic in November 1957—and proceeds through *Call Him Colossus*, *Call Him Dead*, *Call Him Demon*, *Call Him Nemesis*, *Call Him Savage!*, *Call Me Adam*, *Call Me From the Valley*, *Call Me Joe*, *Call Me Mister*, *Call Me Monster*, *Call Me Wizard* and *Call Me Zombie*.

The rewarding thing about all this is that *Call Him Demon* (included here as being by Henry Kuttner and in the 1953 *Wonder Story Annual*, but actually a much older story by Kuttner-Moore, bylined "Keith Hammond" when first published) was a landmark in the field—and for that matter Poul Anderson's "Call Me Joe" ain't bad either.

In the midst of mirth, we are in thought. Here are a baker's dozen titles and, of that thirteen, two represent some rather memorable work and here I sit fondly reminiscing, hauled back into my own past by the scruff of nostalgia, saying to myself it's not such a bad field after all, is it, that has such nice things in it.

Even those of you who don't really know or care whether Grego or Greno Gashbuck was an anagram of Hugo Gernsback and the byline on *The Cosmatomic Flyer*—yes, even those of you who don't care about that, if you care about science fiction, which is a fair presumption, might enjoy having this book around for your rainier afternoons.

FANS do get older, a process not directly related to chronology. 4sJ, for instance, has been around a very long time and is probably the world's most successful fan, to the point where it hardly matters what he does for a living. Harlan Ellison, obversely, was a fan briefly on one afternoon in about 1952. If you stood these people up next to each other, to look at them you'd think it was the other way around.

But no matter. There are certain recognized steps in the evolution and they hold true for most of us, with only their exact arrival time in doubt. But these evolutionary steps are not to be mistaken for fundamental changes. Fans are born from expression; a truly metamorphosed fan would be a griffin, a sphinx. We have them, of course—a few; their wings are not functional.

Flesh being heir to what it is, one of the major areas of fannish interest is the unceasing attempt to impose fannish attitudes on the larger universe. One of the most potent shibboleths is that science-fiction writers (are/are not) capable of making it in the Big World.

Which brings us to *Adventures In Discovery* edited by Tom Purdom (Doubleday, $4.95). This is a book of science-fact essays, all original, compiled by soliciting contributions from science-fiction writers. As such, it's the kind of project that's enormously attrac-

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tive to writers and makes a merchandisable package but may not *ab initio* be of much value to readers.

Happily it happens that there are some science-fiction writers who do know a little science and can then go ahead and write about it at an acceptable-or-better level of journalism. So, despite its dubious premise, *Adventures In Discovery* turns out to be a good book, if not one the world was crying for.

The book's lead essay, *Search for the Hunter*, by Poul Anderson, is its best piece of science popularization. It's a thumbnail review of paleoanthropology, bringing us up to date on things such as the fact that many of the "classic" conceptions about Neanderthal man and Cro-Magnon man have been superseded. It's perversely good to know that the Neanderthal picture we were given in grade school—you remember: the stooped, shambling, squatty, lowbrowed creature with the gnarly bones—turns out to have been based on an arthritic skeleton.

The other essays don't tell us anything quite as startling as that but they're rather interesting and informative nonetheless. The contributions are by Isaac Asimov, James Blish, L. Sprague de Camp, Hal Clement, Robert Silverberg—with a rather good and markedly perceptive report on Dr. Albert Koch, the 19th century charlatan and shownman who once, to his regret, tried very hard to tell the world about a genuine major paleontological discovery—Harry Harrison, John Brunner, Ben Bova, and Willy Ley.

Of all these, only the Brunner fails to be written within the conventional limits set down for writing a popular science essay. The rest all read like reasonably literate, reasonably well-composed reports intended for an audience which does not have time or inclination to read *Science* or *Scientific American* but is nevertheless sufficiently interested to accept this information when it turns up presented in this manner.

The point is that we did not need any of these particular writers to give us this particular value. The Anderson and the Silverberg do, indeed, tell us things we enjoy knowing. The de Camp conveys a sense of what scientific controversy can really be like, as distinguished from the reasoned disagreement of the stick figures in some sf stories. Willy Ley is always good—much better as a science writer than he ever chose to be as a storyteller.

Like that coach on the New York football Giants says, there are different strokes for different folks—and a sense of this truth begins to close in around even those of us who, if they'd kept their promises, would have themselves been contributors to this book. It's a seductive fannish idea. And it's a good solid, unexceptionable end product.

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WE BEGAN as we ended—with a publication which is neither a piece of science fiction nor a product of the normal publishing establishment—nor a piece of fannish ephemera—but rather a fannish permanent publication about science fiction.

There are a great many of these and some of them are so narrowly specialized that they find their small audience automatically. Others, however, are not. This was true of the 1951-1965 *Index*, which is about what and who had been published where and how, and now we have *The Double: Bill Symposium*, in which two people named Bill sponsored an attempt to find out why science fiction is written.

Actually the edition I'm looking at, which is copyright 1969 by William C. Mallardi and William L. Bowers, represents an updating of the original 1963-64 publication. As such it has considerable merit in addition to its overt purpose, because the updating in some cases reflects the rather marked changes in science fiction fannish verbalizations that have been taking place since the early '60s.

The book is based on replies by science-fiction writers to a questionnaire prepared by Lloyd Biggle, Jr., himself a good workman in the field but a scholar as well as a man who cares.

(For instance, Lloyd's patient work had an important share in giving the Science Fiction Writers of America a firm opening shove in a good direction.)

What we have here are more than ninety professional sf writers' replies to eleven questions such as: "For what reason or reasons do you write science fiction in preference to other classes of literature?" And: "What do you consider the chief value of science fiction?" And: "What suggestions can you offer the beginning writer?" Also: "What do you consider the greatest weakness of science fiction today?"

Thornier problems are delved into: "To what extent do you think it's possible to detect a writer's viewpoints as to politics, religion or moral problems through examination of his stories?"

And so on. The results are available for $3.00 from William L. Bowers or William C. Millardi at P.O. Box 368, Akron Ohio 44309. They come in the form of a well designed, handsomely reproduced, 112-page brochure and contain the sometimes sincere, sometimes succinct, sometimes cryptic replies of most of the big and little names in sf.

It's not always the Bradburys and the Asimovs who give the most eye-catching answers:

Robert Moore Williams says in reply to: What do you consider the greatest weakness in the sf of today: "I did not know it had a weakness." Alexei Panshin says,

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"Most of it is ill written." Larry Niven seems to be blaming it on the critics—not on me, thank God. Norman Spinrad says, "Fandom." And Michael Moorcock says, "It no longer looks squarely (or even obliquely) at the real problems of the present and future."

Like the *Index*, this is a browser's book for most of us. It is fascinating to find these diverse peers replying so differently to the same stimuli. It is equally fascinating that they join in expressing an almost universal dubious attitude toward fannish activities.

Phrases on the order of: "It's okay unless the tail begins wagging the dog—" recur from several otherwise various hands and minds. This strikes a rather interesting note when one stops to think that of the names listed here, twenty-eight are immediately identifiable as former active members of organized fandom, even allowing for the old days when no one conceived of any great difference between fans and pros. Furthermore, a little harder dig reveals that *The Double:Bill Symposium* is practically a roster of some of the most active amateur magazine publishers and writers of their day—and that day, in the case of a good dozen of them, is but one generation back as fannish generations are counted.

Well, on to statements such as: "It's quite natural that the academic mandarin whose livelihood depends on hitting kids with his Ph.D. should resent a literary form which can fire their imaginations and capture their interest—and the almost universally hostile reaction from these people to the sf boom of the 'fifties illustrates that." Or: " . . . an enlarging sidestream, possibly blending with the mainstream." Or: "Reading history, and about sex and religion, history of, is valuable to *any* writer."

Beyond these, I dare not go, or I may wind up quoting this whole thing to you. It's about fandom and it's an awful lot of fun. ★

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Many today feel that humans are still evolving—perhaps into—

REFLECTIONS

ROBERT F. YOUNG

WE ARE sojourning on Earth, Berenice and I, on the littoral of one of the fresh-water lakes that have recently reappeared on the north continents, we sleep late mornings and loll through long afternoons; evenings we dip into a perma-chest of ancient writings unearthed by visitors like ourselves and left behind. The chest contains numerous and diverse examples of this lost art—probably they were gathered together by some dedicated eccentric who had no better purpose in life. Some of them are unique indeed and have to do with the future as some of the more literate elements of the then society foresaw it, at that time the earth was

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green, not as green perhaps as it once had been but green enough —they had a complex about this greenness, these writers did, they knew, or thought they knew, that some day it would be gone and this worried them immensely. They wrote endlessly of how green the earth was and how blue were her skies and carped constantly at their contemporaries for defiling the one and polluting the other—they wrote about space, too. Space and spaceships, spaceships built of dreams and metal—they thought, you see, that travel to the stars would be accomplished by means similar to those employed to reach the moon. Oh, such ships they wrote about, these little literary men! Elongated leviathans carrying whole populations to the stars (usually after Earth gave up the ghost), tons and tons and tons of steel plying the immensities—they wrote about aliens, too—aliens from "Alpha Centauri III" and "Far Procyon IV" and, unavoidably, they wrote about us. It's fun to read what someone who died millennia before you were born thought you were going to look like and how he thought you were going to think, although it's annoying also, because these writers lived during an age sickened by sex (among other things), and they could not see human relationships in their proper perspective; hence

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their future travelers were little more than spaceborne troglodytes carrying cudgels in the shape of ray guns and dragging four-wheeled carts behind them—carts filled with misdeeds, misconceptions and mistakes. But, for all their apprehensions,

Earth is still a lovely place to be, especially now in spring—and it is still green . . . I wonder what these writers would think to see me sitting here with my true love Berenice, reading what they wrote so long ago. They would not be able, though, to see us as we really are but only as reflections. The human race has changed incalculably since they walked upon the earth and we are vastly different from them. But they were vastly different, too—were they not?—from the apes who preceded them and who could not write at all, so our being the way we are should not surprise them overmuch. Nevertheless, it would, and our reading what they wrote would surprise them even more and perhaps embarrass them. I turn to Berenice, I say, "Why did they write about the future when they could not even understand the present?" She answers, "That is why—because they couldn't understand. If they had tried—perhaps they could have penetrated the suffocating fog of self-importance that lay thickly over their land and have glimpsed

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part of the truth." "Perhaps you are right," I agree. "But I doubt that very many of their contemporaries read what they wrote, so their insight wouldn't have done the world much good." "Probably," Berenice remarks, "they wouldn't have recognized the truth even if they had glimpsed it. They lived in an age that History later referred to as the Age of Hypocrisy and in an age of hypocrisy there can be no truths—only majority opinions—and these can be bought by men rich and clever enough and even the hardiest of seekers after truth are invariably led astray, and these were not the hardiest."

Nor were they being honest—that which you cannot find in your own today you will never find in someone else's tomorrow. "Sol" they called the sun—and Earth, "Sol III." How quaint. Sol or sun—its rays are warm upon us now, although this is immaterial to our comfort, for our bodies are independent of temperature; but Sol/sun's rays are warm upon us just the same as we loll on the shore of our blue lake, soon, though, Sol/sun will set and the darkness of Earthnight will creep like death across the land, though death to us, of course, is no longer a valid concept, even though it will come to us some day. But it will not come darkly or disdainfully as it

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came to our ancestors—the way the Earthnight will shortly come when Sol/sun has set—I would not have wanted to live in those dim days.

Our interest is not confined solely to those writers in the collection who wrote about tomorrow—we are also reading those who wrote about the times in which they lived. Some of them wrote very well—they reflected their society and if this be a criterion of good writing the Age of Hypocrisy was not lacking in this respect, nor were the ages which preceded it. There was one writer in particular who reflected his time exceedingly well—he was like a mirror held up to the world and the glass was tinted in some magic fashion so that the world was reflected with poignant overtones that linger on long after you have read what he wrote—it is writers like him we read when we would know about the past, the future we already know about because we live in it—but it is intriguing nevertheless to read what those other writers thought it would be like, thought space travel would be like. The

days pass swiftly here and Berenice and I have so much living to do. I say living, although it is not really that, not in the sense it once was understood—that kind of living was a fretwork of contrasts, of play and work, of pleasure and

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pain, of feast and famine, all overshadowed by the imminence of death. No, that is not the sort of living I refer to as I sit here in the

Earthdusk, letting my mind roam

free, our kind of living would have been incomprehensible to the human race before it attained maturity. I say

"maturity" when what I really should say is "present stage of development—" for I, like all humans before me, am afflicted with the smug conviction that the age in which I live is the culmination of all the ages that preceded it (this is the truth Berenice referred to so short a time ago). I suspect that

those malefactors of ancient days who were beheaded for their crimes believed even as the axe descended upon their naked necks

that theirs was the best of all possible worlds. I

wouldn't be surprised—indeed,

I know this to be the case from reading what they wrote—that the poor souls living in the Age of Hypocrisy (for all they may have said to the contrary) believed ardently even while they sank ever deeper into the mire of deceits, lies and self-deceptions they had created for themselves that all that had gone before them had paved the way for them—truly,

man is a prisoner of his times, incapable not only of seeing what his prison looks like from without but of discerning what it is really like within.

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Now the night that is like disdainful death is upon us, and Berenice and I withdraw beneath the canopy of boughs we have fashioned for nostalgia's sake and light a small fire at our feet, not to keep us warm but to keep the past at bay. Beyond its little flames the darkness gathers in—beyond the darkness burn the stars—soon we shall be back among them, Berenice and I, where we belong, we can remain upon a planet only for a little length of time, which makes us wonder why those writers of so long ago arbitrarily concluded that life that originated in the sea would consummate its evolution on the land—that land was a final, rather than a secondary, step—even when they put us in space they made us carry part of the land with us in those ponderous phallic ships that they invented. I tend, though, to be hypocritical in my evaluation of my ancestors, though no more so, probably, than they were in their evaluation of theirs. Theirs climbed into trees, they climbed down from them, we climbed into heaven, *Homo sapiens* was not destined to live forever like an ape, nor *Homo astralis* like a man, no one dwells upon the Earth now. It is no more than a resort which we indifferently maintain—a

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park to which some of us return
at sporadic intervals to reflect
upon what we are and what we
were, it is a big green picnic table
hanging in space, one of many
others like it, some of which are
inhabited by apes. Berenice and
I are sitting at the big Earth Ta-
ble now, others have sat here be-
fore us, others will sit after—the
fire flickers, I add more wood,
the stars recede. I would like to
be a mirror so that I, too, might
reflect my times—we are far
more than star-travelers. We are
a part of the stars and yet the
mirror would show only empti-
ness, the emptiness of space, for
alas, I am no Scott Fitzgerald. I
can only touch a truth here and
there and then only in my
thoughts and I am not sure, per-
haps the biggest truth of all
eludes me still. Certainly it can-
not be as simple as that we are
the ultimate purpose of life. I
think I see it sometimes, though,
hiding in the lines of my true
love's face as she sleeps beside
me in the night, iridescing in the
distant sheen of her hair. But in
the morning it will be gone, and

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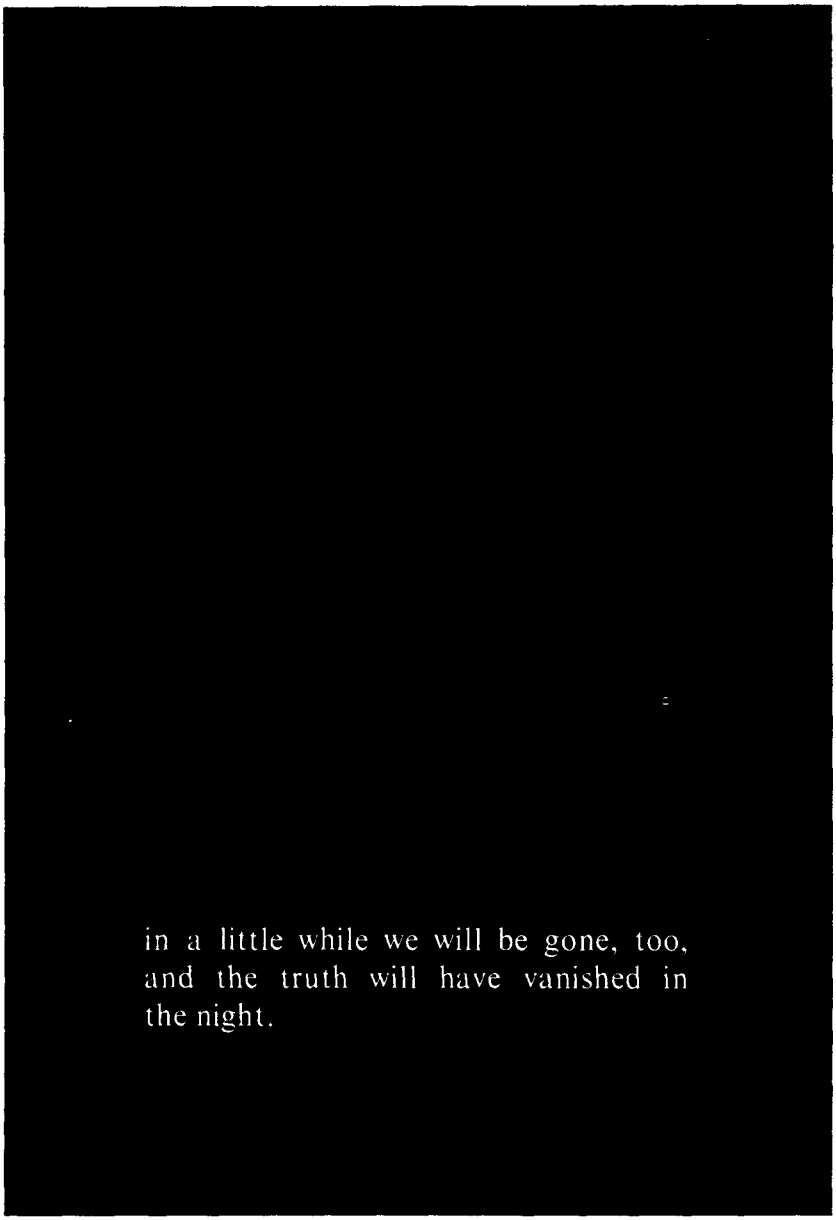

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(Continued from page 95)

to the floor. His eyes darted up to Lenore's impassive face.

Scott, puzzled, stared at him and then at Lenore. He started to rise and then fell back, helpless, as the hiss pierced the suddenly still air of the room and Lenore cried out, "Scott—" and fell to the floor at his feet.

"She—she tried to poison me —" Darby exclaimed, his face a red flag waving in front of Scott.

Scott dropped down to kneel beside Lenore's lifeless body.

Darby stood over them. Over and over again he whispered, "Viper, viper!"

The uneasy thoughts that had plagued Scott since he entered the room blossomed now in the garden of his mind and their scent was sickening. What had Darby been doing in Lenore's apartment? Why had she tried to poison him? He tentatively tasted his own wine. Yes, she had gone for Darby. Why? The word, the question, was a lance searing Scott's flesh as he guessed the answer.

Darby was staring at him. "She —" He stopped, his face closing as abruptly as a slammed door. "Good thing The Propheteer was on the job." His expression dared Scott to speak. When Scott didn't Darby said, "You never know where you'll find a diseased mind. But life must go on. She's better off and so are all of us and the world without her. You've got to take these things with a dram of dispassion."

Scott said nothing. But he knew what he would do. Perhaps he had suspected the truth all along. Perhaps not. But he knew what he must do now.

EVAN was sleeping in his sling beside the warning bell when Scott burst into Square Central in the middle of the long night that had embraced Lenore and refused to release her.

Evan awoke at the sound of Scott's feet running across the tiled floor and sputtered helplessly, trying to adjust his lenses, trying to focus the world of the room around him.

"You killed her!" Scott shouted, fists clenching as he stood before the old man.

"Scott! Killed who? What are you raving about?"

Scott slipped to his knees and began to weep. This was all that was left to him now—tears and regrets and a lust for vengeance. But vengeance was not possible; it would bring death. Or so he had at first thought an hour ago as he stared down at the lifeless body of Lenore who had hated enough to kill Darby.

Lenore, he thought now, kneeling, bent forward, his face hidden in his hands and his shoulders shaking. *Lenore, you never hated*

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anyone. How did he bring you down so low?

The answer that came was shattering. There is no more horrible truth, Scott realized, than the one that tells how one who is made to love can learn to hate.

Evan guided his sling down to where Scott kneeled. He reached out a hand and touched Scott's shoulder. "Scott?"

Scott leaped to his feet and away. "What hath The Propheteer wrought?"

Evan stared at him. Had Scott gone mad? He considered summoning the P-Men. A team from the medicaste. But the boy was weeping again. Evan slinged closer.

Scott told him. Everything.

Long minutes passed.

The sixth finger of Evan's hand reached out as if of its own free will and delicately touched the button labeled P-Men.

"Then—every time I pressed this button—"

Scott nodded stonily.

"Someone died."

He watched Evan crumble before his eyes. Outwardly Evan was still the same but in the way that a hollowed-out mountain is the same. Outwardly the same. Inwardly empty.

"Darby is right," Scott said finally. "Crime can be subtle. But punishable nonetheless. Will you do what I asked?"

Instead of answering, The Propheteer ripped the nearest disk with its load of tape from the grid above the console.

"I never meant to kill," he said. "I don't now."

"It won't be you. We'll only be doing what Darby wants. Reprograming."

An hour later it was finished. The Propheteer replaced the tape disk and turned it on.

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NO STATE ceremony graced Darby's funeral. It took place below Square Central in silence and with only top-grade P-Men in attendance. It was followed by the even briefer ceremony marking Evan Barrister's voluntary retirement as Propheteer.

Scott was installed in his place.

When the P-Men had gone Scott drove Evan to the apartment the state had allotted him. In recognition of his long years of meritorious service it consisted of two full rooms for his own private use.

"You were right about Darby and his motivation," Evan said over coffee in the new apartment.

"I asked myself," Scott said, "why anyone would want to be The Propheteer."

Evan winced. "I—"

"I don't mean you. It was different then. You wanted to prevent crime and to rehabilitate criminals. You wanted to build."

"But you reasoned that Darby wanted to—"

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"Kill. Murder. Destroy. Why else did he ease you out without your knowing about it? It wasn't the money."

"The job pays just enough to get by on."

"It wasn't the status."

"Nobody loves The Propheteer."

"So I came to the inevitable conclusion. What reward did the job offer? What did it allow a man to do or be given, the way Darby had changed the system from your original conception?"

"Kill. Or the chance to kill."

"Just so. So I figured we would beat Darby at his own game by reprograming the Legal Administration tape to include unconcious as well as conscious motivation. Including Darby's."

"And Darby was identified by the system he had corrupted as a criminal to end all criminals. And he paid the price he had charged so many others—death." Evan stared at the cuckoo clock on the table before him, Scott's housewarming gift. "What are you going to do now that you are The Propheteer?"

"I've already done it. Before we left—I resigned. But before I did I suggested that the complex be analyzed and restructured so that potential criminals will still be identified but not killed. I suggested they be apprehended, treated and returned to society. I urged that the medicaste be placed in charge of the program's administration as they were in the beginning. I also mentioned that you might be willing to act as consultant during the redesign period."

"Did they agree?"

"They did."

"You would have made a good Propheteer," Evan said.

"The Propheteer is dead," Scott said.

Evan smiled.

"Long live The Propheteer!"

Lenore, Scott thought with a wrench. I would have ended up calling the complex Lenore.

"Where are you going?" Evan asked as Scott rose. "Stay and talk a little." He almost said please.

Scott shook his head. "I've got to go. But I'll be back for a visit now and then."

He drove too fast to Old Arena and strapped himself onto one of the pallets. One day soon, he hoped, there would be no more need for Old Arena and the things that happened there. But for now, he needed Old Arena. He stared steadily at the battle raging between the sweating teams of gigantic colonials that had been imported from Alpha Asteroid and gradually he let the impotent anger that was born of absolute and irrevocable loss overwhelm him.

He shouted words that shamed him as his fingers tore at the plastic substance of the pallet, shredding it. With every word that left his lips he felt relieved. And defeated. And very much alone in the excited and screaming crowd. ★

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I got sick and tired of coughing and wheezing and hacking. So I quit.

I quit smoking cigarettes. Which wasn't easy. I'd been a pack-a-day man for about 8 years.

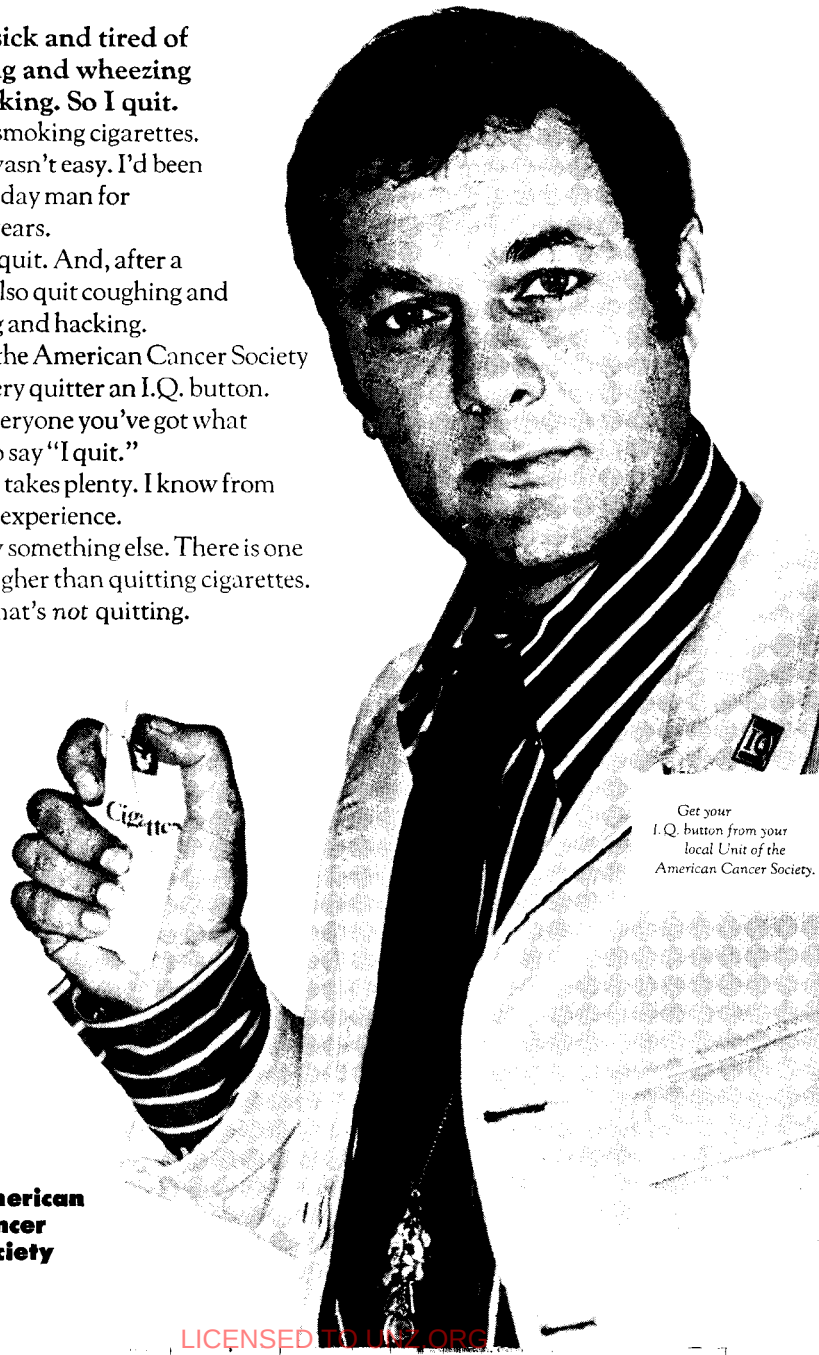
Still, I quit. And, after a while, I also quit coughing and wheezing and hacking.

Now, the American Cancer Society offers every quitter an I.Q. button. To tell everyone you've got what it takes to say "I quit."

And it takes plenty. I know from personal experience.

I know something else. There is one thing tougher than quitting cigarettes.

And that's *not* quitting.



Get your I.Q. button from your local Unit of the American Cancer Society.

american cancer society

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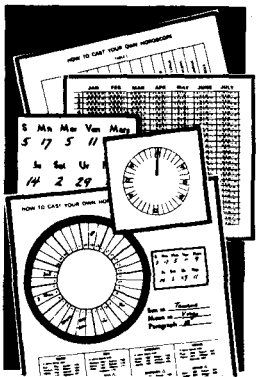

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